



Research Article

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Reading Esther as a Postcolonial Feminist Icon for Asian Women in Diaspora

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Abstract: The book of Esther has been the subject of a wealth of scholarship which has, at times, presented Esther's character as antifeminist. Through the framework of postcolonial and feminist theory, this article interprets Esther in light of her marginalised identity. Her position as a Jewish woman in diaspora who must hide her ethnicity and assimilate into Persian culture reveals parallels to contemporary Asian women in Western diaspora, due to perpetuated stereotypes of passiveness and submission, and the model minority myth associated with Asian immigration. Esther's sexualisation reveals further parallels to the fetishisation and sexual exploitation of Asian women. If we read the text in light of her marginalisation, we can highlight the racial and gendered oppression within the existing power structures, as well as the levels of privilege at work within the character dynamics. Esther serves as an example of the potential that lies in recognising positions of privilege, the implications of identity, and understanding different forms of resistance in order to form a liberative theology. This article outlines the position of Asian women and their proximity to whiteness in relation to other BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) communities, revealing unexpected connections to Esther's character. By situating Esther within intersectional and interdisciplinary theory, her status as a postcolonial feminist icon emerges. Through her story, Asian women in diaspora may find their experiences reflected in the journey to liberation.

Keywords: Esther, Asian theology, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, identity, diaspora, sexualisation

1 Introduction

The book of Esther presents an interesting challenge for feminist interpretation. As one of the only two books in the Bible named after a woman, the text lends itself openly to gender analysis, whilst the narrative focus on her appearance as the path to her success may complicate its appeal for feminist readers. As readers, our hermeneutical approach is influenced by identity markers of gender, race, class, and other axes. Interpretations can be influenced by our individual biases, fields of knowledge, and experiences which differ. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we bring to a text our own frame of reference from which we begin our reading. My reading of the book of Esther was initially shaped by recollections of my mother's storytelling which championed various female biblical characters as role models for women of faith.¹ As such, I had always regarded the story as a tale of empowerment in which a strong woman calculates risks, takes action, and saves her people. It wasn't until I approached the text from a critical

¹ See Tidball, *Esther: A True First Lady, A Post-Feminist Icon in a Secular World*, for an example of how Esther is championed as a role model for Christian women.

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lens at university that I encountered alternative perspectives painting these characters in a different light. I realised how my understanding was shaped by my background and from here, I began to see the connections between Esther as a Jewish woman in diaspora and contemporary Asian women in diaspora. Esther's dual identity as a Jew who must then embody Persian culture – propelled from the peripheral space of marginality into the inner circle of dominant power – reveals the grounds for postcolonial feminist interpretation. The text is filled with complex gendered and racial dynamics, and an awareness of how these identifiers intersect illuminates Esther's role as a postcolonial feminist, one who does not possess the same privileges of her precursor Vashti and therefore cannot navigate within these systems through the same overt means.

This interpretation is rooted in the necessity for an intersectional approach to feminist criticism as advocated by the foundational work of Kimberlé Crenshaw.² Cultural theorist Stuart Hall states that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”³ By situating ourselves within narratives, marginalised readers can form deeper understandings of identity through the mirroring of experiences. I write from my own context as a Burmese woman whose family immigrated to the United Kingdom in early childhood, and therefore has spent her life in diaspora. I approached this reading by first reflecting on the complicated nature of a “postcolonial identity” and what this means for individuals in diaspora, particularly those living in the country that colonised their own. Taking my own context as an example, English swiftly overtook my native tongue (Zopau) as my dominant language, and Zopau itself uses English script as a result of British colonialism. Therefore, the tension of a “postcolonial identity” is embedded within my own use of language. This tension bleeds into diasporic identity as a whole – being ethnically Burmese limits my capacity to be perceived as fully British, whilst a British citizenship prevents me from being perceived as fully Burmese. To be in diaspora is to be in this liminal space, embracing the notion of living in the hyphen (between Asian-British, or other such categories). My position influences my reading of Esther through an increased sensitivity to her marginalisation. Situating myself within Esther's story allows me to recognise how she navigates these tensions, operating through the domains of power available to her. Within the wider narrative, Esther only assimilates into Persian culture so that the Jewish diaspora as a whole can be saved, thus complicating a binary understanding of postcolonial identity. This, in turn, allows me to reflect on my own position within racial and gendered systems, developing a fresh perspective of hybridised identities. Thus, the book of Esther becomes a source of empowerment through which women in diaspora may find their experiences reflected and validated.

Postcolonial and feminist theory provides the necessary framework to locate aspects of the text that are parallel to contemporary experiences of Asian women.⁴ I begin with a brief overview of the Jewish context, touching upon the origins of the text and its role in Jewish liturgy before highlighting its relevance for diaspora studies. I then examine Vashti's role, as comparisons between the two queens reveal a tendency to dismiss one in favour of the other in the search for a feminist interpretation.⁵ Both women can be regarded as feminist icons without feeding into the patriarchal notion of rivalry between female characters. My focus on Esther is not intended to undermine Vashti's actions – her defiance is undoubtedly feminist in its own right. My reading instead aims to highlight how the two perform different modes of resistance: whereas Vashti performs direct confrontation, Esther operates in a more subversive manner. Taking a closer look at

² Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”

³ Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.

⁴ It is important to note that in employing these theories as a framework, they are simplified for the purposes of this article. The definitions provided are not intended to be in-depth explanations of these complex and sophisticated concepts. They are offered as a means of visualising my interpretation and grounding it in a wider literary and cultural context and should be viewed as a frame for these ideas rather than a mirror.

⁵ Fuchs' (1969, 156) analysis of Esther and Ruth as biblical heroines in “Status and Role of Feminine Heroes in the Biblical Narrative” paints a portrayal of Esther as the obedient wife who earns her place in literary prominence at the expense of Vashti. Bronner also discusses how “feminist literature dealing with Esther has occasionally glorified Vashti to the detriment of Esther” in her chapter “Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach.”

the racial dynamics offers a potential explanation for the difference between the queens' actions. As a feminist reader, Vashti is an obvious example of empowerment. As a *postcolonial* reader, however, I find myself more inclined to identify with Esther's form of resistance, reflective of the restrictions of marginalisation. She is a hidden member of an exilic diaspora community and therefore cannot mirror the overt agency that Vashti displays. Instead, she is expected to be passive, submissive, obedient, and sexualised – here I draw my connections to Asian women, who are stereotypically assigned these same traits. I draw on the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, liminality, and the Third Space to define Esther's postcolonial identity and situate her within wider theory. To gain a deeper understanding of these parallels, I then examine lived experiences of contemporary Asian diasporic women. Asian immigrants specifically are subjected to the model minority myth, a harmful stereotype which relies on proximity to whiteness to separate us from other BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) communities. Our position as the so-called model minority affords us a level of privilege which has historically been used against other minorities, particularly as the myth itself is rooted in anti-Blackness, by constructing a hierarchy of migrant groups. In the search for liberation, it is crucial that we recognise the implications of proximity to whiteness. I discuss how the colonial and patriarchal systems that seek to uphold white supremacy are invested in our separation and disconnect as communities of colour. Returning to Esther's own layers of marginalisation, we see a model of this separation in her story, as she enjoys the privilege of the palace, encouraged to hide her Jewish ethnicity and assimilate into the Persian royal sphere thus disconnecting her from the suffering of her own people. Therefore, I present Esther as the assimilated model minority of the Persian empire. She then takes these expectations of submission and sexualisation which were intended to suppress her autonomy, and subverts them to manipulate the men in power. By reembracing her Jewish identity and taking decisive action against those who seek to oppress her people, Esther becomes a threat. Through these characteristics she is able to appeal to King Ahasuerus, moving from passive acceptance to active defiance. Upon making her decision to appear in front of the king uninvited, aware this act is punishable by death, she declares to Mordecai: "And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). This statement encapsulates the qualities of a post-colonial feminist icon that Esther possesses through hybridised identity – acknowledging that if she is to live as Persian, she also lives as Jewish. This reflects the internal embodied conflict shared by many diasporic women on the borderline between two cultures, in turn necessitating a closer look at the role of the body. I conclude my reading with an exploration of how the body is used as a site of inscription, through which racial and gendered oppression exerts control. Esther is a woman subjected to sexualisation who transforms her objectification from an oppressive tool into a weapon she can wield over the king. Feminist theory such as the concept of performative gender sheds further light on the body as a site on which power exchanges take place. The text establishes how oppression is inscribed onto marginalised bodies, before portraying how this can be manipulated as a form of resistance.

I believe the book of Esther contains valuable insight into modes of resistance against oppressive systems and how our identity markers affect these modes. Whereas Vashti shows direct resistance, Esther manipulates the system from within. However, I am not advocating that contemporary readers should directly follow her example. Esther weaponises her sexuality as she recognises it as the only domain of power available – her context limits her means. She successfully subverts that which was used against her for her own liberation. As readers, we need to find ways to translate this into our own contexts, meaning we do not need to work solely *within* the system.⁶ Audre Lorde's famous dictum teaches, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."⁷ Moreover, the concept of Asian women subverting and weaponising their sexualisation to become a threat falls into the harmful trope of the Dragon Lady which should be

⁶ Although we can and do resist directly in many ways, it is important to acknowledge that BIPOC individuals are at a greater risk of harm when practicing direct resistance. For example, this is why white allies form "body shields" during protests to protect BIPOC protestors from police interaction, as white individuals are less likely to be victims of police brutality. Working within the system in the name of resistance should not be dismissed as a valid route. There are many examples of people of colour who have chosen to work within systems with the idea that more power allows for more opportunity to help marginalised groups whilst simultaneously advocating for grassroots community organisations to create change.

⁷ Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," 19.

avoided.⁸ I believe that Esther reveals the value of recognising how we can use our positionality “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). Esther re-embraces her Jewish identity to fight for her people’s liberation, no longer existing in the comfort of her hiddenness. In a similar vein, this interpretation allows me to reflect on the potential of my own position, emphasising the importance of centring marginalised perspectives. Esther and Mordecai position themselves in leadership roles for their own liberation, rather than relying on external salvation – they are the ones to write the decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves, and they record the events. This reversal of power is integral for liberation movements which must centre marginalised voices and avoid speaking *for* them. As Esther and Mordecai take control of their own narrative, so we must have control over our own representation. I find in Esther a postcolonial feminist icon – a figure of empowerment who achieves success, not in spite of, but rather because of her identity which becomes a path to achieving liberation for herself and her people.⁹

2 An overview of the Jewish context

The book of Esther stands out within the Hebrew Bible in that it is one of the only two books named after a woman, and also one of only two which does not mention God. Its inclusion is therefore a point of curiosity: what is the purpose of the book within these religious contexts?¹⁰ Whilst the origins and authorship of the text remain under speculation, it plays a significant role within Jewish liturgy. General consensus suggests that the text was invented to provide an aetiology for the festival of Purim, which falls on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar according to the Hebrew calendar. Purim commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from Haman whose genocidal plot was foiled by Esther and Mordecai as recounted in the events of the book. During the festival’s celebration, the Megillah of Esther (*megillah* meaning “scroll”) is read aloud. The story is set in the Persian empire during the reign of Ahasuerus, presumed to be King Xerxes I who reigned from 486 to 465 BCE.¹¹ The text contains historical inconsistencies as well as several markers of fictional narrative such as notable symmetries, plentiful dialogue, comical elements, literary tropes, and exaggerated numbers, all of which suggest the events of the narrative should not be regarded as historically accurate. Adele Berlin proposes the author of the text intended for the book to be read as a historical novella. Berlin notes that it is a mistake to judge the historicity of a story by its realism: “Verisimilitude is the literary term for the illusion of reality [...] Among the leading arguments for Esther’s historicity are that its setting is authentic and that its knowledge of Persian custom is detailed and accurate. But this realistic background proves nothing about the historicity of the story.”¹² She proposes that the author was not writing history but *imitating* the writing of history, “even making a burlesque of it. Historiography is not a comic genre, and Esther is very comic.”¹³ To demonstrate her argument, Berlin references Esther 10:2 in which the events of the text are said to be written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia. For Berlin, the annals serve as the functional equivalent of the pea in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale *The Princess and the Pea*, which closes with the following: “And the pea was put in the museum, and it is there now, unless

⁸ The Dragon Lady trope is a stereotype that portrays Asian women as strong, domineering, mysterious, and sexually alluring (Herbst 1997). The term comes from the villain of the comic strip “Terry and the Pirates” by Milton Caniff, inspired by characters played by actress Anna May Wong. It is applied to powerful Asian women, particularly Asian actresses, and usually in a derogatory manner.

⁹ Although I am reading Esther as a postcolonial and feminist icon, it is important to note that her character is praised for conforming to the expectations of a cissexist and heterosexist society. It is clear that the gender dynamics at work within the story perpetuate cissexist and heterosexist tropes in many ways which will not be explored fully here due to the limited scope of this article, however, this would be an interesting and important avenue for further research.

¹⁰ Walfish, “Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis,” 305.

¹¹ Gafni and Ginsberg, “Ahasuerus-Xerxes,” 538.

¹² Berlin, “The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,” 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

someone has carried it off. Look you, this is a true story.”¹⁴ Berlin notes the literary convention of insisting on a story’s truth by offering proof, arguing that an author is just as likely to invoke this convention for a fictitious story, “if not more so. The author of Esther is imitating the history writing of the book of Kings not because he wants his story to sound historical, but because he wants it to sound biblical.”¹⁵ This leads us back to the question of why this story has been included in the Bible despite the lack of explicit reference to God or religion more generally. Viewing the story as a “Diaspora story” can help to answer this question.¹⁶

The book of Esther was the last of the 24 books of the Tanakh to be canonised by the Sages of the Great Assembly – according to the Talmud, the original text was written by Mordecai and the text as it stands is a redaction by the Great Assembly. Berlin highlights:

Esther, like other Diaspora stories, draws extensively on biblical themes and style because it wants to create strong ties with preexilic Israel and with the traditional literature that had been or was in the process of being canonized. The burden of Diaspora stories is to provide Jewish continuity in the face of the overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community. A good way to provide this continuity is to link the present with the past, and the new literature of the Diaspora with older, traditional literature. Moreover, by sounding biblical, Esther increases its chances of being perceived as traditional and authoritative, which was essential for a book that is providing an etiology for a new, non-Torah festival.¹⁷

Another way of framing this is to read Esther’s story as a “construction site in which ethnic identity is given shape,” as Anne-Mareike Wetter proposes.¹⁸ Wetter analyses the text for markers of ethnicity in an attempt to clarify the identity of the *yehûdîm* (translated as “Jews”). She bases her analysis of ethnic markers on Hutchinson and Smith’s definition of ethnîe: “A named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or language, a link with a homeland, and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.”¹⁹ Mordecai in particular bears several markers of an ethnîe due to his provided genealogy, references to mythical ancestors, shared historical memories, and a link with a homeland:

Mordecai’s genealogy is an eloquent example of the intertextual character of the book of Esther. Mordecai’s own name, with the theophoric element Marduk, was a common name of the Persian period for both Jews and non-Jews, and reflects the practice of Jews living in Diaspora to take over personal names from their surroundings. By contrast, the names forming Mordecai’s genealogy firmly link him to the literary tradition of Israel. The author abandons historical plausibility in order to link Mordecai to two individuals from the early days of the kingdom of Israel/Judah: Kish and Shimei.²⁰

In other words, Mordecai’s ancestry is historically impossible as he is introduced as a member of a group exiled from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.²¹ Wetter believes the focus in Esther 2:6 is on the shared historical memories of exile and diaspora: “The verbal stem *hlg* (go into exile) occurs as often as four times in this one verse. This suggests that it is not geography that makes someone a *yehûdît*, but rather the common experience of being deported.”²² Here lies a crucial aspect of the text’s significance – at the heart of the narrative lies the Jewish community’s exilic existence that comes under threat. Wetter refers to a similar observation made by Beal: “To be Jewish, is, in the book of Esther, to know exile as formative experience.”²³

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In “Looking at Esther through the Looking Glass,” Brenner focuses on the text as a “Diaspora story”, exploring an answer to the question of what it takes to survive and succeed as a Jew in the Diaspora.

¹⁷ Berlin, “The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,” 7.

¹⁸ Wetter, “How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in a Diaspora Narrative,” 598.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 598–9.

²¹ Unglaub, “Poussin’s ‘Esther before Ahasuerus’: Beauty, Majesty, Bondage,” 115.

²² Wetter, “How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in a Diaspora Narrative,” 600.

²³ Ibid.

This reveals how Jewish identity in this text centres on diasporic experience, rather than the perceived notions of what it means to be Jewish that we may possess as contemporary readers. To further emphasise this concept, Wetter draws attention to the characterisation of Haman:

On an even deeper and more general level, Haman is not just a second Amalek or Agag; he is the personification of the innate fear of annihilation, of the ultimate loss of identity. And Mordecai is not simply a second Moses or an all-improved Saul – he is the ideal Israelite who guarantees that this identity will survive, even under the most hostile circumstances.²⁴

The significance of Haman’s relationship to Amalek is a reference to Deuteronomy 25:19: “When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” Through this intertextual link, Wetter concludes that the Diaspora community personified in Esther and Mordecai proves to be “the most worthy bearers of Jewish tradition: They have not forgotten to blot out Amalek (Deut 25:19), and, unlike their forefathers, they have actually managed to perform the deed. Significantly, they do so without divine intervention.”²⁵ This act of blotting out endures today in the celebration of Purim, when the name “Haman” is blotted out (through noise, for example) during readings of the Megillah. These observations highlight the significance of Esther and Mordecai’s actions within Jewish contexts, even if the events were to be understood as fictitious. The narrative is an exploration of diaspora for a community that has experienced a history of displacement, reaffirming the importance of defending one’s identity. Purim is an important event in Jewish liturgy celebrating the liberation of a community, and victory against the powers who seek to oppress. By understanding the book of Esther’s Jewish context and origins, the potential for contemporary postcolonial interpretation becomes clear.

However, if we are to use the text as a source for liberative theology, the ending poses some difficulty. The liberation and victory of the Jewish diaspora within the narrative is achieved through violent means, as the story concludes with a decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. How do we contend with the levels of violence described in chapter 9 resulting in the murder of 75,000 people? Acknowledging the context of the story and finding ways to reimagine its message for our own contexts is key. In the setting of Ancient Persia, and the wider setting within the Hebrew Bible, this ending is not out of place. This is what “victory” against oppressors looks like for the oppressed, in this context. Whilst seeking a liberative interpretation, our task as readers is to imagine what this “victory” against oppression looks like for ourselves. I believe it is particularly significant that the original decree to eliminate the Jewish people could not be reversed as it was written in the name of the king: “And you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king’s ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked” (8:8). As it is impossible to revoke the original decree, the solution was to write a new one allowing the Jews to defend themselves. This is indicative of the inherently flawed nature of power exerted through law within the kingdom. The absolute and irreversible power assigned to the king’s seal seems arbitrary to us as readers – by revoking the decree, the widespread violence would not have occurred. Here, the reaction of the oppressed is in response to an injustice of the law, reflective of why the nature of power within the system is inherently flawed and should be dismantled. Reframed for the purposes of a liberative reading, this is an example of collective resistance to oppression. Instead of an incitement of violence, however, it is a call to protest the injustices of the law and dismantle oppressive institutional structures, be it white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and so on. We learn from the book of Esther that power lies in collective resistance. Lorde describes how, “without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.”²⁶ An example of how the collective power of community has been realised can be found in the 2020 US presidential election campaigns in which grassroots efforts by organisers to mobilise

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 602.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” 18.

communities achieved historical results in key states.²⁷ A powerful example more explicitly related to racial oppression is the global Black Lives Matter movement which grew in response to police brutality and systemic racism.²⁸ This can also be recognised as part of a larger chain of protests in recent years from Chile to Hong Kong, France to Sudan – the collective resistance of the people has been evidenced around the world. Returning to the book of Esther, my reading draws on Lorde’s notion that without community there is no liberation. To borrow Lorde’s expression, within the palace, Esther holds only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between herself and her oppression, as Mordecai is quick to point out: “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews” (4:13). She must recognise this and align herself with her community so they may all find liberation. At its heart, the book of Esther is a story of collective resistance against oppression, as Purim and its significance in Jewish contexts continues to commemorate to this day.

3 Encountering race in interpretations of Vashti

Vashti only makes an appearance in the opening chapter of the book of Esther, yet her actions are integral to discussions of gender and race within the text. Due to the nature of Esther’s succession and their seemingly opposing responses to the king, comparisons between the queens are inevitable. Interpretations can at times create a dichotomy between the two which this section aims to dispel by portraying how both display resistance through methods influenced by power dynamics. Jewish feminist interpretation has often focused on rehabilitating Vashti, as Sawyer notes that the more elevated in status Esther becomes in Jewish tradition, including her central role in Purim, “the more Vashti becomes her foil. The evil woman is set in contrast to the perfect Jewish woman personified by Esther.”²⁹ In order to understand the critical reception of the two queens, we must take a closer look at their portrayal. Some Jewish interpretations reveal an underlying layer which paints Vashti as the evil woman, Esther’s foil, that Sawyer describes. In response to the question of why Vashti held the feast in the royal house, a place of men, rather than in the women’s house, Rava said: “The two of them had sinful intentions. Ahasuerus wished to fornicate with the women, and Vashti wished to fornicate with the men [...] According to Rava, Vashti was a willing and active participant in Ahashverosh’s lascivious plan. He wanted her to dance naked in front of the other men, and she did as well.”³⁰ Here, Vashti is established as a villainous character. Interestingly, although her ethnicity is not specified in the Christian biblical interpretation, the Gemara reveals that Vashti is also Othered within this Persian setting:

When the men began to converse, some said: The Median women are the most beautiful, while others said: The Persian women are the most beautiful. Ahasuerus said to them: The vessel that I use, i.e., my wife, is neither Median nor Persian, but rather Chaldean. Do you wish to see her? They said to him: Yes, provided that she be naked, for we wish to see her without any additional adornments.³¹

²⁷ A *Financial Times* article by Fedor, “Stacey Abrams credited for mobilising black voters in Georgia,” reported: “Ms [Stacey] Abrams, a voting rights activist and former Democratic state legislator in Georgia, is widely credited as the architect behind grassroots efforts to turn “blue” a state that has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in nearly 30 years.”

²⁸ The movement began in July 2013 when the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter spread on social media in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, regarding the death of Trayvon Martin the previous year in February 2012. In 2014, the movement gained national recognition due to street demonstrations following the deaths of Eric Garner (in New York City) and Michael Brown (in Ferguson, Missouri). The movement has since demonstrated against the deaths of numerous Black victims of police violence (Moore, “Police brutality in the United States” and Day, “#BlackLivesMatter: the birth of a new civil rights movement”).

²⁹ Sawyer, “Queen Vashti’s ‘No’ and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools In Biblical Narrative,” 12.

³⁰ Daf Shevui to Megillah 12a:20, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

³¹ Megillah 12b:1, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

The misogynistic portrayal of Vashti is evident in this passage, as she is referred to as simply a vessel for the king's use. It has also been proposed that Vashti was to be punished in this way as a result of her own actions:

This teaches that the wicked Vashti would take the daughters of Israel, and strip them naked, and make them work on Shabbat [...] This is as it is written: 'After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her' (Esther 2:1). That is to say, just as she had done with the young Jewish women, so it was decreed upon her.³²

Daf Shevui's commentary describes how this is therefore intended as a measure for measure punishment, for forcing the daughters of Israel to dance naked in front of her. Yet Vashti refuses. Daf Shevui continues: "Having said that both Vashti and Ahashverosh intended to commit acts of licentiousness, the rabbis are forced to explain why she refused."³³ Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina said: "This teaches that she broke out in leprosy, and therefore she was embarrassed to expose herself publicly. An alternative reason for her embarrassment was taught in a *baraita*: The angel Gabriel came and fashioned her a tail." Of these two peculiar reasons, Daf Shevui notes that the rabbis considered leprosy was a punishment from God, which makes it an appropriate explanation in line with their portrayal of the sinful Vashti. The tail is harder to explain, "Perhaps we might surmise that being given a tail is a sign of her becoming like the serpent, wily. Tails are one of the things that distinguish humans from other mammals."³⁴ In any case, it is evident that Vashti is established as a villainous character in these interpretations. Firstly, by drawing the age-old comparison between women's sexuality and sin, and secondly, by painting her as either plagued with disease or as a monstrous, serpentine figure which dehumanises her – both images connoting evil. Through acknowledging these portrayals, the reasons behind the focus of Jewish feminist scholarship on restoring Vashti's character become evident. Her role as a feminist icon in her own right is worth exploring, particularly as her method of defiance carries interesting implications for our later discussion of Esther.

Vashti is first introduced hosting a separate banquet for the women of the palace, mirroring King Ahasuerus' male banquet. Both events land at the end of a 180-day period of feasting and drinking across the kingdom. On the seventh day of these closing banquets, the king commands his seven eunuchs "to bring Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold" (1:11). As this fell on the seventh day of the closing festivities, the timing paints the king's command as a finale. He has spent half a year parading his wealth and luxuries, and now wishes to parade his final object of desire, reducing his wife to another possession. Oren describes the female body in this context as "at once tool, agent and object of delight," Vashti's beauty serves as a mirror to confirm her value as the king's possession thus increasing his power before the guests.³⁵ As noted previously, Rabbinic interpretations have inferred a sexual undertone to the command, "in that she has to cross from female space to male space naked wearing only the crown."³⁶ Whether Vashti was summoned to display herself wearing the crown or wearing *only* the crown, the scene upholds patriarchal oppression in either case. A woman is reduced to her appearance, objectified and sexualised, and commanded to cross from a female space in which she holds power to a male space in which she is vulnerable under the leering, intoxicated male gaze. Vashti is faced with a choice: whether to lose face within the overarching culture of honour and shame³⁷ by displaying herself in forbidden male space, or to lose face by defying her husband's authority.³⁸ And so, aware of the risks, she chooses the latter: "But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him" (1:12).

³² Megillah 12b:4, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

³³ Daf Shevui to Megillah 12b:2, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

³⁴ Daf Shevui to Megillah 12b:3, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

³⁵ Oren, "Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia," 146.

³⁶ Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 133.

³⁷ See Klein, *Honor and Shame in Esther* for further discussion of this aspect of the cultural setting.

³⁸ Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 133.

Despite the patriarchal power Ahasuerus holds over Vashti, they display differences in personal autonomy. Whereas the queen acted upon her decision, the king defers to his sages for advice on how he should respond. The text suggests that the king is not versed in the laws of his own empire, instead relying on those who were near him: “Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king’s procedure toward all who were versed in law and custom [...]): ‘According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?’” (1:13–5). In this exchange, the king enjoys the privilege of having sages at his disposal, demonstrating the sheer opulence of his position. His character does not quite align with the foolish king trope, instead, it is a representation of exaggerated power in that he is too important to be well-versed in the law and can easily deflect these decisions onto his sages. In the framing of his question, he references himself in third person and includes his title: “The command of King Ahasuerus.” This language of separation from himself places emphasis on his role, further exaggerating the trope of the excessively powerful king. In other words, not only did Vashti’s actions go against his will, they went against “the command of the king” as a concept. The subsequent decree declared that “all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike,” according to letters sent “to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house” (1:20–21). Bea Wyler describes how “Ahasuerus’ edict was designed to make the father’s language dominant in the home,” as when an inter-marriage took place “the mother’s language would normally prevail,” seen in the book of Nehemiah when Jews married foreign wives and their children would speak the mother’s language.³⁹ The role of language in power dynamics is inadmissible: “Language used as an instrument of power is the means to show how far-reaching male dominance may be [...] When men use a language foreign to the women’s, women are silenced. Thus the absolute power in Ahasuerus’s empire is established as male power.”⁴⁰ Close attention to language reveals how the locus of power shifts between Vashti and the King. At first, Oren notes Vashti’s position as an active subject who “Uses the banquet to her own political ends as the women’s leader (1:9). The women’s banquet allows Vashti to obey the king’s rule of unrestricted drinking, while simultaneously exercising the same kind of power over women.”⁴¹ The linguistic connection between their actions lies in the repeated use of the verb *ash* (“to make”). Until this point, the king has been the subject of every active verb – now Vashti becomes an active subject throwing a banquet in the same manner.⁴² This linguistic detail simultaneously suggests that Vashti possesses a level of agency, whilst painting a scene representative of the patriarchal nature of the setting as the banquets are segregated by gender – a point which Johnny Miles notes is a signal something is amiss since gender separation is not customary at Persian banquets.⁴³

Vashti’s banquet acknowledges the queen’s degree of power over women as the banquet motif is symbolic of consuming the provider’s ideology. This symbolism is particularly significant as Vashti comes to represent *all* women of the kingdom. As the text first establishes Vashti’s power over the women of the court through this unusual segregated banquet, the later connection drawn by the eunuchs between her actions and those of women throughout the kingdom comes as less of a surprise. Wyler summarises: “Executive power in this empire wants to be respected [...] When individuals practice resistance, the punishment is extended to the whole of their – innocent – identity groups.”⁴⁴ This sequence of events, in which individual resistance signifies collective resistance leading to collective punishment, is a clear attempt by those in power to maintain control over their subordinates. The king’s approach reflects that of an authoritarian regime, due to the immediate widespread suppression of resistance, fearing one act of protest will spark a revolution. In other words, if the queen is stated as leading the women in much the same vein as Ahasuerus hosts the men, it is not unreasonable to assume that she will influence these women in other manners, including disobedience. Thus, the dominant (male) power must establish its control.

³⁹ Wyler, “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,” 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 145.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Miles, “Reading Esther as Heroine,” 133.

⁴⁴ Wyler, “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,” 122.

Vashti's banquet could simultaneously reflect the king's "full-frontal male power" whilst parodying it by mirroring his masculine initiative with one that is female, described by Sawyer as an emasculation of his event. To this end, the Targum Sheni (an Aramaic version of the text) describes how Vashti used her banquet as "an opportunity to disclose the most intimate secrets of the king's bedchamber to her women friends, 'she told them everything – the king's bedroom, where he eats, where he drinks, where he sleeps.'"⁴⁵ Sawyer explains that "this male fantasy, incapable of not centring the male subject in their imaginings of women's conversations, confirms Vashti as an unworthy partner for the king."⁴⁶ The innate fear of women as unworthy partners (and women's conversations as acts of betrayal) is not new to us as readers. The fear harks back to Eve, the archetypal woman. According to some traditional interpretations, by hosting this banquet in which women reveal secrets to each other, Vashti has committed an act of betrayal and is as guilty as her mother Eve, "the arch betrayer in the eyes of traditionmakers."⁴⁷ Sawyer notes that both Vashti and Esther display the characteristic of *arum*. In Genesis 3:1, this is translated "cunning" or "crafty," but in the Wisdom literature it is viewed as a positive quality and assumes the meaning of "pragmatic."⁴⁸ Sawyer explains how this is a characteristic of the serpent from the creation narrative that is learnt by Eve and passed onto her daughters: "Where female characters are given key roles in regard to the divine plan, the male figures invariably become passive, even weak. This literary device is highly theological, enabling the power of God to be clearly demonstrated."⁴⁹ Thus, the two queens form part of a larger pattern of biblical women who have been assigned roles to enable a divine plan, particularly significant due to the lack of God's direct intervention within the text.⁵⁰ Moreover, by linking Vashti's defiance as an act of betrayal to a chain of biblical women, Sawyer describes a societal fear of women as revolutionaries that persists to this day. To demonstrate this, Sawyer introduces her article with a scene from *The Simpsons* Season 5 Episode 4:

Lisa: "I always knew someday Mom would violently rise up – and cast off the shackles of our male oppressors."

Bart: "Aw, shut your yap."

Kent Brockman (Anchorman): "At the risk of editorializing, these women are guilty and must be dealt with in a harsh and brutal fashion. Otherwise, their behavior could incite other women leading to anarchy of biblical proportions. It's in Revelations, people! Look."⁵¹

The narrative played out in this animated scene is remarkably similar to Vashti's story arc. Sawyer notes that this exchange encapsulates the "devil may care" attitude of women who "dare to refuse to conform to male expectations," and are "prepared to suffer even the most dire consequences for their actions," an apt description of Vashti's character.⁵² Here, the anarchic nature of women's refusal is identified, whilst we "witness the profound fear provoked by this apocalyptic scene of female autonomy in action."⁵³ Thus, by establishing this comparison between biblical and contemporary fiction, Sawyer accurately portrays how this fear has threatened the patriarchy throughout history: a fear of a woman's defiance invoking revolution.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Sawyer, "Queen Vashti's 'No' and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools In Biblical Narrative," 9–10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ See Van Den Eynde, "If Esther had not been that beautiful: dealing with a hidden God in the (Hebrew) Book of Esther" for further discussion of the significance of Esther's role in relation to the lack of divine intervention within the text.

⁵¹ Sawyer, "Queen Vashti's 'No' and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools In Biblical Narrative," 1–2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Regarding the connection between an individual protagonist and the wider repercussions of their story arc, Brenner discusses the recurrent biblical motif of female characters who step outside of the strictures of appropriate female behaviour to subvert male power, and how these figures are often metaphorical or symbolic of wider issues such as the Jewish community in exile. See "Introduction", *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*.

Timothy Beal examines this fear that he frames as “two male nightmare-fantasies of women speaking” in which female characters play a significant role and male characters become weak.⁵⁵ The excessive retaliation from the men of the court towards one woman’s actions reveals the underlying power she possesses, as we find at the heart of this sequence lies the fear of women speaking; thus far women have had no voice, only the king and Memucan have spoken – for the women to begin speaking to each other would be “a Persian lord’s nightmare.”⁵⁶ Through her actions alone, Vashti threatens to dismantle the patriarchy. Bach notes how biblical narratives “Operate in the same way as modern narratives in which male characters attempt to hold steadily to the object position through controlling the gaze.”⁵⁷ Therefore in order to suppress this nightmarish outcome, Vashti must be banished and her punishment declared throughout the empire, should any woman choose to follow her example. She “wins” in the sense of reclaiming autonomy over her body, but is ultimately removed from the narrative in exchange. Her actions may resonate with a contemporary reader who finds a patriarchal connection that has existed from the Persian empire to the present day: the male gaze. A contemporary feminist reader may see in Vashti a mirrored self. Readers may recognise semblances of the commanding male gaze through the common example of men demanding women to smile, a diluted case of the patriarchal ideology at play within Vashti’s narrative – that a woman’s appearance is under the control of male desire. If Vashti refuses to display herself, she must be punished with invisibility and will never be allowed to appear before the king again, instead replaced with “another who is better than she” (1:19). The two queens then become reversed images of each other: whereas Vashti’s defiance is in refusing to appear in front of the king, Esther’s defiance is in demanding to appear in his presence, both risking punishment by their decisions. Sawyer argues that Eve and Vashti are unique among biblical female characters “In that they confront the given order of things rather than trying to manipulate them.”⁵⁸ Through their confrontations, they “emerge as women on their own terms over and against the male naming and ordering of things” by saying no – Eve to a life in a Garden “where she and her daughters could never be liberated” and Vashti “to a life that suffocates her sense of self and dignity.”⁵⁹ This method of resistance is in contrast to the “performative guises put on by their biblical sisters,” such as Esther, and “suggests a way more resonant of being women in a contemporary world.”⁶⁰ As feminist readers, we recognise Vashti’s “no.” We are all too familiar with the male gaze and most women could likely draw a parallel to their own experience of being objectified, therefore we find a deep connection to Vashti in this scene. Her “no” rings out through history. Sawyer summarises, “If we surf across the centuries, and across the waves of feminism, to arrive in our present day, maybe we can find a fragile moment of commonality across all our myriad of relativities that allows us to recognize that familiar, often frightening moment when we say ‘no.’”⁶¹

Having explored Vashti’s role in the narrative, Esther’s actions undoubtedly present a challenge for feminist interpretation in comparison. Susan Niditch turns to the literary genre of folklore, presenting Vashti as the trope of the “uppity” wife which “exposes a male-chauvinistic tendency shared by the author of Esther and the larger folk tradition” whilst the heroine of the story is “a woman who offers a particular model for success, one which oppressors would be especially comfortable.”⁶² The author of Esther implies that “opposition is to be subtle, behind the scenes, and ultimately strengthening for the power structure. A number of modern feminist writers have, in fact, found their heroine in Vashti, their empathy with her, while regarding Esther as a weak collaborator with tyranny, an antifeminist.”⁶³ However, I argue that

55 Beal, “Tracing Esther’s Beginnings,” 98.

56 Ibid.

57 Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 146.

58 Sawyer, “Queen Vashti’s ‘No’ and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools In Biblical Narrative,” 12–3.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 13.

62 Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” 33.

63 Ibid.

reception of Esther as an antifeminist reflects the limited framework of Western feminism within the movement as a whole. Kwok Pui-lan argues:

White middle-class feminist theologies were not relevant for Asian women without first being radically challenged [...] The failure to respect difference and the constant incorporation of the Other into one's own perspective are rooted in the social and cultural matrix of colonialism.⁶⁴

Within the setting, Esther embodies the status of the Other. To incorporate her into the same perspective of white feminist theologies, as Kwok states, would be a failure to respect her difference. Kwok argues that “feminist analyses as proposed by white middle-class women are not radical enough,” and the narrow definition of patriarchy as the domination of men over women fails to “provide tools to examine colonialism, cultural imperialism, religious pluralism and the horizontal violence of women against women.”⁶⁵ Esther's narrative is affected by her race as well as her gender. Previous scholarship has labelled her as “too busy with her makeup and other skin-deep activities [...] unaware of the imminent danger to her people.”⁶⁶ However, Dube emphasises that a postcolonial analysis of a text “indicates that gender experiences in imperialist settings are different, depending on one's relation to the imperialist powers.”⁶⁷ Differences between the two queens' proximity to imperialist powers cannot be ignored. To discredit Esther's character as antifeminist is to ignore the intersection of colonial oppression which limits her capacity to be radically resistant. This is not to propose that Esther's representation of feminism should be considered superior to Vashti's. A side by side comparison provides two clear types of female resistance in the face of male absolute power: “While Vashti refuses to display her physical beauty, Esther deliberately cultivates her physical beauty as a means to her end: gaining liberation for her people.”⁶⁸ In recognising the role that racialisation plays on power dynamics within the court, a more complicated picture emerges.

4 Situating Esther in Wider Theory

To illuminate the relevance of the text for Asian feminist theology, postcolonial and feminist theory provides a framework through which to explore these connections. Situating Esther in wider literary and cultural theory draws out the relevance of the text to the lived experiences of contemporary women of colour.⁶⁹ By making these connections, this interpretation is grounded in the reality of these systems of power that operate outside of theological discourse. Joerg Rieger describes the postcolonial challenge of theology as a question of whether theology supports or resists empire and the colonial, implicitly or explicitly, as it is impossible to separate theological criticism from the political in a world permeated by power differentials.⁷⁰ Colonialism is embedded within our power structures, therefore postcoloniality must be acknowledged in such explorations of identity. These discussions should include not only academic theory but also lived experiences, as alternatives of resistance are “Usually not discovered at the desks of mainline theology but emerge in relation to the real-life struggles of the colonized.”⁷¹ Musa Dube states: “My experience has taught me that a written book does not only belong to its authors – it also belongs to its

⁶⁴ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Fuchs, “Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative,” 153.

⁶⁷ Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” 595.

⁶⁸ Sawyer, “Queen Vashti's ‘No’ and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools In Biblical Narrative,” 8.

⁶⁹ In “Postmodern Blackness”, bell hooks examines the relationship between critical theory about aesthetics and culture and Black experiences. This is an illuminating discussion on how cultural theory and lived experiences intersect in regard to racial identity.

⁷⁰ Rieger, “Introduction,” 476.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

readers and users,” referring to reading theories that “insist on the reader as the maker of meaning.”⁷² These theories described in essays such as Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” adopt a post-structuralist approach in which the death of the author is the birth of the reader, meaning the notion of the author as a godlike authority is replaced by the reader’s agency to interpret a text relationally, freeing the text in a sense from the biases the author may have crafted into the work.⁷³ Post-structuralism is relevant to postcolonialism as the movement was a reaction to the decentering of the universe during the 20th century from white Western norms, which had until this point provided a firm centre against which variations could be identified as “Other” and marginal.⁷⁴ This theoretical framework forms a foundation for postcolonial analysis of the Bible, in which white Western interpretation can itself be decentred as marginalised perspectives emerge. Dube continues:

I am historically situated within this framework of facts and experiences. I, therefore, read the Bible as a black, Motswana woman from the region of Southern Africa, a student of religion, a survivor of colonialism, who lives in a *luta continua*⁷⁵ (a continuous struggle) against neo-colonialism [...] My analysis is both feminist and postcolonial.⁷⁶

Approaching my own analysis, I begin by asking: how am I situated within this framework? I read the Bible as an Asian, Burmese woman, also a student of religion, who lives as a citizen of the country which colonised her own. Within the book of Esther specifically, I situate myself as a reader who shares the complexities of dual identity, assimilating from a native culture into a dominant culture through immigration, as well as a reader who experiences what Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have coined “double colonisation” referring to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy.⁷⁷ Ritu Tyagi explains the task of a postcolonial feminist who suffers from double colonisation: “In this oppression her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor [...] Not only that, she also suffers at the hands of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts.”⁷⁸ To see how double colonisation operates, we can turn to some examples from feminist discourse.

Western feminist discourse is susceptible to universalising women’s experiences and misrepresenting patriarchal struggles by diminishing the nuances of race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers which results in the unintentional silencing of marginalised voices. Lorde’s keynote presentation at the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association Conference addresses this phenomenon, during which she asked: “What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman’s face?”⁷⁹ Mariana Ortega builds on Lorde’s critiques, describing the prevalence of academic arrogance in the field of feminist theory. Ortega references a speech from the 1979 New York University Institute for the Humanities Conference at which Lorde is one of two African–American women on a panel about feminism who have been invited at the last minute: “She wonders why this is the case; she wonders how the audience deals with the fact that while they are attending a conference on feminism, women of color are cleaning their houses and taking care of their children; she wonders about academic arrogance.”⁸⁰ Ortega

⁷² Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” 588.

⁷³ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 1326.

⁷⁴ The decentering of the universe during the 20th century revolves around several ideas, such as WWI destroying the illusion of steady material progress, the Holocaust destroying the notion of Europe as the centre of human civilisation, scientific discoveries such as the theory of relativity destroying the ideas of time and space as fixed and central absolutes, and intellectual or artistic revolutions such as modernism rejecting central absolutes such as harmony in music, chronological sequence in narrative, and the representation of the visual world in art. The resulting universe we live in is decentered from the West or inherently relativistic (see Villarreal, “An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory: WRIT 150 – Critical Frameworks”).

⁷⁵ Dube uses the term *luta continua* (Portuguese for “the struggle continues”), a popular rallying cry and slogan for protest movements that captures the struggle against colonial rule. It was used as the slogan of the FRELIMO movement during Mozambique’s war for independence against Portuguese colonial rule.

⁷⁶ Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” 588.

⁷⁷ Tyagi, “Understanding Postcolonial Feminism,” 45.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ortega, “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color,” 57.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

follows this with a scene from a meeting she herself attended in 2001: ““We need to give space to their voices,” say the concerned, well-meaning Third Wave feminists-until a light-skinned woman raises her hand and politely says, “You keep talking about women of color as if we were not here.””⁸¹ I believe that these three scenes are crucial to understanding the relationship between white feminist theory and the lived experiences of women of colour. Ortega describes a “loving, knowing ignorance” which is “an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of color that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them.”⁸² The implications of this loving, knowing ignorance are often more harmful for the women in question. We can consider the opposing opinions surrounding the hijab as a symbol of patriarchy. Tasnuva Bindi quotes from an interview in which an editor of a Dutch feminist magazine explains that she would never hire a woman who wears a hijab as an editor: “[I] as a feminist want to offer help to those Muslim women who in their hearts very much would take off the symbol of their inequality – the headscarf – but who (as yet) do not dare that. That is the least that these women may expect from me.”⁸³ Conversely, research has shown that Muslim women view the hijab as a form of liberation: “Wearing the hijab is also a ‘rebellion against society’s expectations’ concerning beauty and sexuality and it liberates them from the images of femininity dictated by Western society.”⁸⁴ This is just one example of Western feminism operating with a loving, knowing ignorance in attempts to “liberate” Muslim women from their “oppression.” This is grounded in the universalisation of Western ideas on modesty and femininity, and ignorance of other cultural values which in effect silences the voices they attempt to speak for, instead speaking *over* them. I present this particular example to demonstrate how attempts to liberate marginalised women can actually lead to discrimination, as seen in the editor who refuses to hire a hijabi. This brings us back to Lorde’s question: can she see her heelprint upon another woman’s face? I believe that in our approach to liberation, we must move away from the notion of being “a voice for the voiceless.” However well-intentioned this idea may be, it is executed with a loving, knowing ignorance – after all, these communities have never been voiceless.

Applying this concept to textual hermeneutics, Dube comments on how Western feminists may be unaware of their privileges over their non-Western counterparts: “No doubt Two-Thirds World women suffer more from imperialist intrusion; hence, they are more conscious of it. Western feminist readers [...] can, consciously or unconsciously, bracket out a post-colonial analysis.”⁸⁵ The bracketing out of a text’s postcolonial elements results in further suppression of marginalised perspectives by making race a secondary or tertiary factor, or dismissing its implications altogether. In regards to the book of Esther, Western feminist analysis is prone to praising Vashti’s embodiment of modern feminist values whilst dismissing the racial vulnerability of Esther’s position. This leads to criticism of her actions as anti-feminist in light of her precursor’s method of defiance. Bridging the gap in interpretation involves bringing together experiences of women and recognising the impact of imperialism which permeates our outlook, “Precisely because imperialism was and still is a global event and conception that has left little or no place untouched; hence, it informs our perception of the Other.”⁸⁶ Perceptions of the Other are integral to the text. The men fear the women as the Other and impose control over them by creating a law which demands their obedience, whilst Haman fears the Jews as the Other and forms a genocidal plot against them. The same fear of the Other contributes continually to the struggles of marginalised identities in contemporary politics, with disturbing parallels between oppression written into Persian law and the institutionalised oppression within our own systems.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Bindi, “Feminism and Islam: The problems with applying Western feminist values to Non-Western cultures.”

⁸⁴ Zevallos, ““A Woman Is Precious:” Constructions of Islamic Sexuality and Femininity of Turkish-Australian Women.”

⁸⁵ Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” 596.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ See Snyman, “Esther and African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Decolonial Inquiry” for an in-depth discussion of decoloniality as a heuristic key, and similarities between the text (namely the issue of Haman as perpetrator) and the contemporary postapartheid context of race trouble.

I find aspects of my racialised experience mirrored in Esther, namely the concepts of mimicry and hybridity developed by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. Amardeep Singh has provided the following explanations of these ideas, stating: “Bhabha’s terminology is closely derived from ideas and terminology from Freud and French thinkers like Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan [...] I do not think his essays were ever meant to be read as pedagogical reference points.”⁸⁸ The following should therefore not be read as exhaustive definitions. I employ Singh’s explanations as they define complex terms using references from specific cultural contexts which in turn highlights their relevance for my own analysis. Mimicry describes members of a colonised society imitating the language, dress, politics or cultural attitude of their colonisers, in the context of immigration this is seen as an “opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself.”⁸⁹ The process presumes an intentional suppression of identity and is often seen as shameful:

A black or brown person engaging in mimicry is usually derided by other members of his or her group for doing so. (There are quite a number of colloquial insults that refer to mimicry, such as “coconut” – to describe a brown person who behaves like he’s white, or “oreo,” which is the same but usually applied to a black person).⁹⁰

Hybridity has a less fixed definition, most commonly referring to colonial subjects who balance “Between eastern and western cultural attributes. However, in Bhabha’s initial usage of the term in his essay ‘Signs Taken For Wonders,’ he clearly thought of hybridity as a subversive tool whereby colonised people might challenge various forms of oppression.”⁹¹ In the context of Esther, cultural hybridity and similarities to mimicry are the most obvious of the concepts at work. Esther becomes a cultural hybrid between Jewish and Persian culture and employs the process of mimicry to assimilate when she enters into Persian space. Mordecai derides Esther for not speaking up for the Jews and using her position of privilege to help her people, despite the fact that it was his command to hide her Jewish identity that Esther was obeying: “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews” (4:13–14). Rieger argues that mimicry “informed by poststructuralist philosophical observations, emphasizes the differences between the original and that which is imitated. In this difference lies the potential for subversion and ultimately for resistance.”⁹² Within the text, this describes assimilation from Jewish culture to the imitated Persian culture in the sense that Esther’s ability to seamlessly cross between the borders of Jewish and Persian identity shows that this border is, in itself, permeable and arbitrary. Her crossing of the thresholds reveals how racial categories are constructions rather than concrete distinctions. Up to this point, Esther was Persian. What exactly made her Persian? The ambiguity of her assimilation reflects the arbitrary nature of constructed categories. It is in this difference that the power of subversion and resistance lies. Rieger continues: “As a result, hybridity and mimicry point not to the celebration of difference, multiculturalism, and plurality, but to the ultimate liberation from suffering and oppression.”⁹³ Esther uses these concepts to subvert the power dynamics within the court and liberate her people from their oppression. This can only be achieved through hybridity – revealing her Jewishness whilst playing by the rules of Persian custom. Hybridity works only on the basis of “power differentials” as it is “the reality of those who find themselves located on the underside of the colonial or postcolonial world, because they cannot escape the impact of those in power.”⁹⁴ Therefore, in any acts of resistance, Esther must operate *within* the system. She transitions from passive object to active subject, a key player in the political game who ultimately reverses the established authority. Using hybridity as a critical tool, I recognise parallels between Esther and Asian immigrants as representations of the model minority. Parsing Esther’s decisions within the context of feminist and postcolonial theory reveals a shared struggle with contemporary Asian women under “double colonisation.”

⁸⁸ Singh, “Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Rieger, “Introduction,” 480.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 479.

This shared struggle extends from the individual experience to the communities' as a whole. Oppression is experienced by Asian diaspora communities embedded in politics and language through institutionalised racism, "written in" to the governance of our societies as oppression against the Jewish community is "written in" to the law of the Persian empire. In the text, racial and gendered oppression within the empire stems from essentialist perceptions – the actions of one woman are generalised to all women, the actions of one Jewish man represent the Jewish population. This essentialist notion pervades racist and sexist discrimination in contemporary societies, where the (mis)conceptions of a minority come to represent their entire race or gender from the stance of the oppressor. Wonhee Anne Joh describes how within postcolonial theology "The power of hybridity is in the emergence of subjugated knowledge to enter into dominant discourses and thereby shift the basis of its authority."⁹⁵ This power of hybridity informs my reading, using subjugated knowledge to enter into theological discourse on the text.⁹⁶ The relevance of Esther's character for Asian women may not be immediately apparent due to the history of colonialism in Christian interpretation, which results in the erasure of colonised perspectives. However, theologian C. S. Song frames this challenge of interpretation with a striking message: "What is limited is our theological imagination. Powerful is the voice crying out of the abyss of the Asian heart, but powerless is the power of our theological imagining."⁹⁷ Therefore, although my reading requires a level of theological imagination, it is one that leads to the voicing of Asian women's experiences which too often remain silenced. I read the book of Esther through the prism of my own lived experience, through which these connections are refracted. However, I refrain from claiming my own reflections as the universal experience of all Asian immigrant women – doing so would reinforce colonial notions of essentialism and Orientalism, prescribing a homogenous, monolithic Asian identity. My reading stems from my experiences within the United Kingdom raised with a Christian theological background, which will not wholly apply to Asian-diasporic women of different contexts. Interpretations will also vary significantly between Jewish Asian women and Christian Asian women considering the different roles of the text in Jewish and Christian liturgy. Moreover, Kwok notes how some Asian theologians resist being identified as feminist theologians, as the term "feminism" connotes "a radicalism and separatism advocated by middle-class European and American women" and "the struggle for autonomy has been criticized repeatedly as both Western and bourgeois, not applicable in the Asian context."⁹⁸ Thus, addressing some of the issues affecting Asian women requires a shift in perspective, moving from the field of theory to lived experiences. It is important to note that the issues I draw on do not cover the depth and breadth of Asian immigrant women's experiences, given the multitude of factors which form our hybrid identities, however, I will focus on issues that are reliant on generalised and enforced projections of "the Asian woman."⁹⁹

5 Contemporary experiences of Asian women in diaspora

Collective attitudes towards immigration differ between the contexts of each country, however there are clear parallels between the setting of Esther and Western contexts such as the US and the UK which my reading focuses on. The most evident parallel to highlight is the encouragement of assimilation as a route towards acceptance. Esther undergoes this process when she assumes her role as the king's wife.

⁹⁵ Kwok, "Theology and Social Theory," 607.

⁹⁶ See "Conference Statement from the 1987 Asian Women's Theology Consultation" and Francisco, "Hybridity in Asian Christian Discourse: Critical Issues from Asian Christian Experience" for further discussion on how hybridity sheds light on Asian Christian theological discourse.

⁹⁷ Kwok, "Theology and Social Theory," 608.

⁹⁸ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 9, 17.

⁹⁹ See Kim, "Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Asian American Women" for further analysis of postcolonialism and its impact on contemporary Asian women.

Assimilation is encouraged as conforming to the dominant culture creates more chance of acceptance and less chance of discrimination. If we examine the UK context, this notion is visible in current rhetoric regarding the UK's immigrant population littered with implications that immigrants who adopt British culture are favoured over immigrants who maintain their "home" countries' culture whether in language, dress, or other means. One of the clearest reflections of this can be seen in the issue of Esther's name change, an effort to assimilate that bears resemblance to the phenomenon of Asian people who adopt two names: one in their native tongue and one in English. Cherie Chan introduces her article on the topic with two well-known examples: "You might have heard of movie star Jackie Chan, but you sure do not know he is addressed as Cheng Long in Chinese. As for martial artist Bruce Lee, his Chinese name is Li Xiaolong."¹⁰⁰ Linguistic professor David C. S. Li describes this as "borrowed identity," explaining how in Hong Kong, the use of Western names was a consequence of British colonisation.¹⁰¹ Chan describes how "The colonial history plus the fact that the given Western names are often not registered in identity documents explains the unusual phenomenon of casually changing one's own names."¹⁰² By using English names, Chinese speakers borrow the Western interpersonal communication system: "The traditional Chinese rituals and rules of social interaction do not favor the use of our given names with non-acquaintances. Our Chinese given names tend to be used only with intimate others."¹⁰³ Using a Western name serves as a buffer to avoid being "too formal and too intimate" and thus a borrowed identity turns out to be "very useful."¹⁰⁴ By adopting a Persian name, Esther also takes on a borrowed identity creating a distance as her Hebrew name is only known by intimate others (in this case, Mordecai) whilst her Persian name proves useful for assimilating into the palace. Like Esther, Asian immigrants may also consider adopting a Western name for the purposes of assimilation. Racial discrimination is so deeply embedded in our systems that adopting a Westernised name produces tangible benefits. A study conducted by Oxford University sent out various job applications with identical qualifications and experience, the only difference being the assigned name. Results showed that "compared to White British applicants, people of Pakistani heritage had to make 70% more applications, Nigerian and South Asian heritage 80% more applications and Middle Eastern and north African heritage 90% more applications."¹⁰⁵ Another study conducted by Xian Zhao and Monica Biernat presented the trolley problem¹⁰⁶ to white participants and found that the name of the individual at risk affected decision-making: "The shares of participants who decided to sacrifice the white Mark and the Asian Mark were about 68 percent and 70 percent, respectively; subjects were more likely to divert the train to hit Xian, which they chose to do 78 percent of the time."¹⁰⁷ We can see from these studies that adopting a Western name may have an impact on the levels of discrimination faced by immigrants.¹⁰⁸ A further reason behind adopting a Western name is that Asian names may not translate well and Westerners can have difficulty pronouncing foreign names: "A Chinese name that is perfectly beautiful in Chinese may have misleading meanings if the Mandarin Pinyin is directly used as the English name. A classic example is '诗婷,' a girl's name that means 'poetic and graceful' in Chinese. Sadly, its pinyin is 'Shiting.'"¹⁰⁹ Mispronouncing foreign names may seem inconsequential, however, this can easily become a form of erasure. Names carry significant value as our identifiers. Immigrants may experience people deliberately mispronouncing

100 Chan, "Why some Chinese Speakers also Use Western Names."

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Croxford, "Why Your Name Matters in the Search for a Job."

106 A hypothetical ethical problem in which "an out-of-control train is about to run over five people on the tracks; pulling a lever to divert it would save them, but kill a helpless individual on another track" (Zhao and Biernat, "Your Name Is Your Lifesaver: Anglicization of Names and Moral Dilemmas in a Trilogy of Transportation Accidents").

107 Zhao and Biernat, "Your Name Is Your Lifesaver: Anglicization of Names and Moral Dilemmas in a Trilogy of Transportation Accidents."

108 Pinsker, "American Immigrants and the Dilemma of 'White-Sounding' Names".

109 Lu, "Why do Chinese People have Western Names?"

their name or even anglicising their name for easier pronunciation which are both forms of erasure reflective of an anti-immigration rhetoric that encourages assimilation.¹¹⁰

The UK's anti-immigration rhetoric has been clearly evidenced throughout the Brexit campaign and its collateral effects, including the points-based immigration system to be introduced in January 2021, all of which contributes to the perception that there are “good” and “bad” migrants whose worth can be determined through their economic value to the UK. Here we find parallels to the American context, specifically with regards to Asian immigration, in which the model minority myth pervades wider perceptions of Asian Americans. This label ties in to the ethos of the “American Dream,” the idea that the opportunity for upward social mobility is available to every American. The term “model minority” was first coined by sociologist William Petersen to make comparisons between Japanese Americans and African Americans, solidifying a prevalent stereotype of Asians as “Hardworking, rule-abiding citizens who were able to rise above the adversity of their World War II incarceration in internment camps in merely 20 years.”¹¹¹ The stereotype encourages the need to rise above adversity and pander to the dominant culture to become an accepted member of the “host” society, thus dismissing experiences of hardship and discrimination and excluding them from the solidarity found in minority identities. The concept of the model minority describes Asian immigrants as having “Achieved social and economic parity with their White counterparts. This image of success often leads others to assume that Asian Americans do not experience difficulties and/or are problem-free, thus leaving them out of research and policy considerations.”¹¹² The generalisation is also problematic for classifying a multitude of distinct groups under a single rubric and overgeneralising the diverse experiences amongst these groups whilst undermining other communities to which the model minority are compared.¹¹³ The assumption behind this stereotype is that Asian Americans are (by nature) hardworking, law-abiding, and respectful of the dominant culture – in other words, they have played by the rules making them “successful” immigrants to aspire to. Shih describes how the term is “A racial framing that has been externally imposed on Asian Americans, typically by elite powerful Whites,” as they are “Racialized as ‘forever foreigners’ in the United States and often classified as ‘ethnic’ – more Asian than American – and assumed to be non-English speakers and/or non-citizens (e.g., the question, ‘Where are you from?’).”¹¹⁴ This dilemma lies at the root of cultural attitudes towards Asian immigrants: they are constantly held in between the conceptualised high standard of the model minority and the perpetual foreigner regardless of the length of time they have lived in America and the extent of assimilation. This model minority perception extends to wider contexts outside US immigration – for example, Masako Fukui describes her experience as a child migrant in Australia: “My parents drilled it into me as I was growing up that I was ‘an unofficial Japanese ambassador’ to Australia, that my behaviour would influence how Australians feel about *all* Japanese.”¹¹⁵ She states how being “good,” “quiet” and “assimilated” is making her angry due to the “never-ending race work” this involves, referring to the constant self-justification and explanation immigrants must perform to establish their right of belonging in their “host” country. It is indicative of what La Trobe University lecturer Tseen Khoo calls “contingent acceptance:” “As perceived outsiders, our sense of belonging is always conditional on us being ‘good migrants,’ meeting demands

110 For example, Republican senator David Perdue mispronounced Kamala Harris’ name at a Trump campaign rally: “Kamala-mala-mala? I don’t know. Whatever.” he said to a laughing crowd. This form of erasure was also evidenced in a tweet by Lord Kilclooney, “What happens if Biden moves on and the Indian becomes President. Who then becomes Vice President?” claiming that he “did not know her name and identified her with the term Indian” apparently being fully aware of her ethnicity, before even learning her name. For more information, see Buncombe, “Republican senator accused of racism after mocking Kamala Harris’ name at Donald Trump rally” and BBC News article, “Kamala Harris: NI peer Lord Kilclooney told to apologise for ‘offensive’ tweet.”

111 Shih et al., “Impacts of the Model Minority Myth on Asian American Individuals and Families: Social Justice and Critical Race Feminist Perspectives,” 414.

112 *Ibid.*, 413.

113 *Ibid.*

114 *Ibid.*, 414.

115 Fukui, “Being a good, quiet and assimilated ‘model minority’ is making me angry.”

never made of those who enjoy white privilege.”¹¹⁶ The model minority stereotype hinges on an expectation of gratitude for being placed on a pedestal of relative success, as after all, “around the beginning of the last century we were the vile Yellow Peril and, more recently, we were accused of ‘swamping’ this country. Yet here we now are, socially integrated and upwardly mobile, compliant workers valued for our economic usefulness.”¹¹⁷ Fukui highlights how the idea of a “good migrant” also implies a “bad migrant,” which exacerbates divisions between marginalised communities under the same arch of discrimination.

The model minority myth creates a complicated identity for Asian women on the grounds of political identification. Shireen Roshanravan explores this issue through the concept of “passing-as-if,” a term she introduces to describe “the desirous and anxiety-ridden adoption of counter-mainstream, revalorized, racial identities among those people of color who must navigate ambiguous racial inscriptions like ‘model minority.’”¹¹⁸ The inscription of model minority status is a racial project which has a goal of fragmenting cross-racial coalitional movement against white capitalist institutions, by portraying some people of color as “models” who justify the poverty of “bad” or “real” racial minorities.¹¹⁹ This leads to an internal dilemma for Asian immigrants, as Roshanravan questions:

Why does my mother deny that “we” are racialized? That is, why does she deny that we are thought to be inferior people? Why do I have such an urgency to say, “Yes, yes we are racialized, and I can prove it!” and, at the same time, feel that I cannot really prove it, that my own example is flimsy?¹²⁰

For Roshanravan, the term “Asian American” is similar to the move from “Mexican American” to “Chicano/a” and the reclamation of Black as “signifying ‘power’ and ‘beauty,’” in that these are revalorised, collective racial identities: “Instead of state-sponsored, top-down, abstract racial categories, the grassroots, organic cultivation of ‘Chicano,’ ‘Black,’ and ‘Asian American’ sought to ‘redefine and recapture the specificity of their cultures.’”¹²¹ The terms are forms of resistance against collective subordination through reclamation of identities, similar to the introduction of “women of colour” which challenges “claims that one can isolate gender violence from its racialized context or racial violence from its gendered context.”¹²² For Asian women who have internalised the identity of a model minority, we can be hesitant to claim ourselves as women of colour, as we often believe we do not experience racial and gendered violence alongside our counterparts. Anti-Asian racism can never be equated with anti-Black racism, as anti-Blackness pervades through all cultures. This does not eradicate the racial oppression experienced by Asian communities, however it does explain why Asians may be hesitant to claim the term “people of colour.” This issue has been particularly contested for light-skinned East Asians as they are often racialised as white-passing whilst benefiting from the institutional privileges afforded to the model minority. Here, Roshanravan’s term “passing-as-if” can be employed:

Passing-as-if emerges from the disorienting experience of being racialized as inferior through ambiguous social inscriptions like “honorary white,” all the while lacking a community that is invested in forging a collective, non-dominant construction of one’s self.¹²³

Passing-as-if a woman of colour describes a liminal space in which an Asian immigrant woman adopts, mimics, or associates themselves with other collective racialised groups of resistance to white power, when unable to position herself in the same space of political resistance through her own racial experiences. I interpret the term as a disorienting space of in-between, where the individual feels a disconnect between their racial identity and the politicised resistance of other minorities. Victor Turner developed the usage of

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Roshanravan, “Passing-as-if: Model-Minority Subjectivity and Women of Color Identification,” 4.

119 Ibid., 3.

120 Ibid., 2.

121 Ibid., 5–6.

122 Ibid., 6.

123 Ibid., 8–9.

the term “liminality” to describe identities which are necessarily ambiguous, eluding or slipping through “the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions of cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”¹²⁴ As mentioned previously, Asian women do not suffer under the same levels and means of discrimination as Black and Indigenous women and may prefer not to adopt the term “women of colour” out of respect for other communities. They are therefore caught “betwixt and between,” lacking a full sense of belonging to either side and blurring the lines of identity – an extension of hybridity and mimicry specific to the complexities of immigration.

At the heart of this contention lies the issue of proximity to whiteness. Every “racial category” of marginalised women experiences oppression in different forms and to different extents, such is the insidious nature of white supremacy. Although it impacts us all, it is important to recognise these distinctions in order for true solidarity to be effective and not performative. As Asian immigrants we must learn the history which shapes our communities, how the model minority myth impacting us today is rooted in anti-Blackness, and how we perpetuate harm whether consciously or subconsciously if we continue to strive for proximity to whiteness. Moreover, we need to recognise the inner complexities of our positionality, recognising how Asian-diasporic women experience oppression *within* our communities such as casteism, colourism, classism, and the oppression of ethnic minority groups. Proximity to whiteness refers to the differing levels of privilege which exist when BIPOC groups are aligned with whiteness, in this case, the privileged status Asians experience in Western contexts in relation to other BIPOC groups particularly within the work environment. Proximity to whiteness has long been employed as a tool to justify systemic racism and uphold white supremacy, often prioritised over solidarity with Black and Indigenous communities.¹²⁵ This position creates a tension of perspective for Asian migrants wherein their acceptance (or even desirability) by the white majority is presented as a privilege, yet one that is rooted in a form of dehumanisation. The model minority myth views Asian migrants as hard working, obedient, and servient. The harmful implications of such a stereotype then become masked by the perception of Asians as successful high achievers (consider prevailing stereotypes of Asian children raised by so-called “Tiger Parents:”¹²⁶ achieving high grades, studying around the clock, advanced in musical instruments, progressing to careers in STEM, and so on). As a result, this myth positions Asians as the perfect labourer. Kazumi Chin frames this through the following metaphor which provides a helpful lens through which to visualise the concept:

One of the most important lessons I ever learned was when my friend told me, “Kazumi, they think we’re robots.” Because in the white imagination, Asians fill the role both of robots who are super calculating, and also robots who do menial labor. Robots are the perfect laborers under global capitalism, and Asians, too, come to represent this perfect labor force. While we also both colonized and excluded, it is the inclusion of Asians that leads to us becoming robots: inclusion on their terms. Colonialism and exclusion exist in order to create specific modes of the inclusion of Asian under global capitalism. My dedication, my compliance, my ability to follow orders, my rate of work, my diligence: all of the markers of the perfect worker come to be ascribed to my raced body.¹²⁷

Chin’s metaphor reveals the ways in which Asians become non-social, unemotional beings whose identities are wrapped up with their work through “inclusion on their terms” – proximity to whiteness allows for a specific form of inclusion granting Asians this status in exchange for their work. The metaphor is further expanded by considering the implications of gender: how are Asian American women perceived in the white imagination?

¹²⁴ Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” 359.

¹²⁵ Kim, “Why Be a ‘Model Minority’ When You Could Dismantle White Supremacy?”

¹²⁶ “Tiger parenting” is a term referring to a form of strict parenting to pressure children into achieving academic success, or excelling in extra-curricular activities such as music. The term “Tiger Mother” was coined by Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor, in her memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). The concept predominantly refers to Chinese-American contexts, however, it relates to a form of parenting which is typically found in households in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

¹²⁷ Chin, “One of the most important lessons I ever learned was when my friend told me, ‘Kazumi, they think we’re robots.’”

Another important lesson here is that Asian American women inhabit both the robot trope within the white imagination, and also, of course, the geisha trope. This is why robot geishas are ubiquitous within white science fiction: because robot geishas are the perfect Asians. The trope of the geisha is also the trope of the prostitute who falls in love with her benevolent suitor, which is also the trope of the faithful wife, which is also the trope of the mail-order bride, which is also the trope of the war bride [...] These two tropes at once create the perfect Asian: the woman who feels no emotions except for her male counterpart, who lives only to serve him, who has no life beyond her labor and sexuality which are oftentimes one and the same.¹²⁸

Asian women therefore occupy a specific space within the white imagination. Although racial fetishisation and hypersexualisation are not uniquely associated with Asian women, and can be experienced by all BIPOC identities, submissiveness is notably linked to Asian fetishisation. If we consider the geisha trope in combination with the robot trope, the Asian woman then becomes the “perfect” woman because she is both obedient and sexual, robotic and submissive, and is expected to behave as “programmed.” It is through the visualisation of these conceptual tropes that I draw my connection to Esther. Chin refers to the literary trope of the prostitute who falls in love with her benevolent suitor as well as the trope of the mail-order bride, ideas which can be loosely translated into Esther’s story as she herself is a victim of sexual exploitation, groomed into the king’s harem to eventually be chosen as his bride. Through the development of her character, we witness what happens when these assigned roles and attributes are subverted, as Esther comes to utilise her sexualisation to achieve her desires. Chin reflects upon this further in the context of Asian women and the robot geisha trope:

But this convergence is also a site of horror for the white male imagination: because this dual agency becomes a possibility: the possibility of a robot gaining sentience, and the possibility of the woman coming to take back possession of her own body and desires. So the perfect Asian is threatening in her perfection, despite her perfect, because she always holds the possibility of revolution: if her stereotypical kindness and service and intelligence are turned towards herself and her own self-liberation.¹²⁹

This dual agency turned towards the self for liberation is played out within Esther’s narrative, a woman who began her story as a sexually exploited victim, moulded by the men controlling and advising her, who then finds self-liberation by taking back possession of her body in an empowering backlash against her “programming.” As Chin states, the notion of the perfect Asian woman is threatening because she holds the possibility of revolution, just as Esther became a threat to the system through her own revolution. This metaphor helps us to understand what it means for Asian women in diaspora to have Esther as their icon. When we identify with her character development through this lens, it highlights the powerful potential that lies within this ever-present “possibility of revolution” we carry, a revolution enacted by taking back possession of our desires, engaging our agency, and turning these stereotypes towards ourselves for the purposes of liberation. With this concept in mind, we can further examine Esther’s own marginality leading to her act of revolution.

6 Esther’s layers of marginalisation

Esther is first introduced by her Hebrew name Hadassah: “Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter” (Esther 2:7).¹³⁰ Her dual identity is

¹²⁸ Chin, “Another important lesson here is that Asian American women inhabit both the robot trope within the white imagination, and also, of course, the geisha trope.”

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Some interpretations have also proposed that Mordecai takes Esther as his wife, rather than his daughter. This reading complicates the picture of Esther’s status as Ahasuerus’ wife, with further implications regarding her sexual exploitation. See

clear from her introduction, “Hadassah, that is Esther,” as “the two names suggest an unfixed identity; her body carries within it an identity dilemma.”¹³¹ Oren highlights how “twice naming a woman is a bold device, since the majority of women in the Bible are nameless [...] calculated to make Esther visible and to emphasize her critical role.”¹³² The Hebrew name grounds her in the Jewish world, mentioned only once, whilst the Persian name appears 54 times – they refer to “a set of interlinked discursive practices, symbolizing negotiation of political power and ethnicity.”¹³³ The narrative is an exploration of these interlinking worlds, an exploration of boundaries and border-crossing: between Jewish and Persian, exile and royalty, concubine and queen. Oren continues:

Esther becomes the discursive bridge between the world of Mordecai the Jew and that of Ahashverosh the non-Jew. The dominant use of the name “Esther” enables her to cross the boundaries between her two worlds, to use one system for the sake of the other. Her personal identity emerges out of her struggle to reconcile her divided loyalties.¹³⁴

She becomes a cultural hybrid, an amalgamation of her previous existence in Jewish diaspora and her new experiences of Persian royal culture. She is the model migrant within the king’s court, subjected to the imposed expectations of her role as queen. Through assimilation, she achieves success and is therefore seen as exempt from the discrimination faced by the other Jews within the empire. Due to the privileges afforded to her within the bubble of the court, she does not experience the same level of oppression as her Jewish counterparts outside of the court, many living as exiled minorities who are now collectively and systematically being persecuted by the elite.

Esther’s capacity to hide her Jewish identity is reminiscent of the notion of white-passing people of colour. The term refers to people of colour whose external appearance does not clearly convey their ethnicity as their skin tone and features may “pass” as white. This results in a liminal zone wherein the individual suffers under some of the negative aspects of immigrant existence, such as institutionalised discrimination and conflicts of identity, however they are granted a certain level of privilege that non-white-passing people of colour do not possess. White privilege itself persists in various forms. In the United States, the existence of white privilege is evidenced in the police brutality against Black and minority ethnic communities. This creates a continuing source of tension wherein racial profiling and deeply entrenched systemic racism have created disproportionate and devastating impacts on people of colour within the criminal justice system. White privilege is also evident in the idealisation of Eurocentric features displayed within the fashion and beauty industries, a concept so ingrained within our media and advertisements that skin bleaching products intended to lighten skin tones provide a booming multi-billion dollar industry across Asia.¹³⁵ White-passing people of colour are thus caught between the overarching structures which oppress ethnic minorities whilst also being able to access the privileges (or being exempt from the discriminations) granted by the assumption of whiteness. Esther occupies a similar in-between space as the white-passing minority, as she “passes” as a non-Jew within the Persian setting. One of her defining traits repeated throughout the text is her ability to find favour: “And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her” (2:1). This could suggest that Esther is ethnically ambiguous, meaning that people saw her as their own “kind” and thus she was able to be openly welcomed by all whom she met. Moreover, this could be interpreted as a mark of divine favour, the work of an otherwise absent God within the narrative allowing Esther to be propelled into the necessary position to enact her purpose, as pondered by Mordecai: “And who

Walfish, “Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis” for an in-depth discussion of this interpretation.

¹³¹ Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 157.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ An article in *South China Morning Post* states: “According to a World Health Organisation survey, nearly 40 percent of women polled in countries such as China, Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea said they used whitening products regularly” (Tam, “How multibillion-dollar skin-whitening industry propagates racial hierarchies in Asia and promotes unrealistic standards of beauty”).

knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (4:14).¹³⁶ In any case, Esther possesses a remarkable skill in knowing how to please people; she repeatedly requests and follows the advice of Mordecai and Hegai, adapting and learning how to win the favour of the king and his court. As a result, she reaches a position of privilege by passing herself as Persian and suitable for royalty.

This position of privilege culminates in tension between herself and Mordecai, when Mordecai pleads with her to "beg for mercy" in the presence of the king on behalf of the Jews (4:8). Esther finds herself conflicted. She reminds Mordecai:

All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold sceptre to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king (4:11).

She is presented with a choice: remain silent and watch her people's persecution from the cocoon of the palace, or risk her life and reveal her true identity. Mordecai responds with a solemn speech:

Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish (4:13–14).

He shatters the presumption that Esther's "passing" identity would mark her as exempt from the decree. Mordecai invokes a threat of divine retribution, inciting Esther to act with the implication that she was *fated* to save her people, and will be punished if she remains silent whilst another takes her place to save the Jews. Thus, Esther makes her choice. She assumes agency by ordering Mordecai in a reversal of power relations, instructing him to tell all of the Jews to fast for three days in an appeal for Esther's safety, as she and her maids will do.¹³⁷ Then, she declares: "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (4:16). Oren dissects this statement:

Esther's experience of pain at breaking from her acquired Persian cocoon is expressed in her response to Mordecai's request for her to act on her people's behalf: "If I am to perish, I shall perish" (4:16). These words express her conflicts as an individual, an assimilated Jew and a woman, the agony of her double identity: "if I perish" as Hadassah, "I shall perish" as Esther. If her Jewish self dies, so does her Persian self. The repetition of the word "perish" communicates in explicitly fatal bodily terms the need for her self-sacrifice.¹³⁸

It is in this agony of double identity that Asian women in diaspora may find themselves reflected in Esther's story. To borrow from Roshanravan's terminology, it seems as though Esther is passing-as-if a minority when she appeals before the court. Similar to the inner conflict of Asian women, she experiences a disconnect from the racial oppression experienced by the persecuted minorities in the empire whilst she is separated within the privileged sphere of the court as a model migrant – obedient, submissive, and *successful*. Her assimilation has earned her a space in the middle ground, elevated above other minorities as a "good" migrant whilst remaining ever-beneath the dominant culture in power.

It is evident from Vashti's deposal that the role of the queen is not equal to her royal counterpart, regarded primarily as an object of desire for the king's gratification and certainly not fit for leadership roles. Esther's role as the Queen of Persia is largely nominal, as the queen is not expected to break through to the

¹³⁶ This phrase "for such a time as this" from Mordecai's rebuke has been co-opted by different speakers in various contemporary examples and used to present leaders as potential saviour figures. A recent example of this was during Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Israel, during which he was asked: "Could it be that President Trump right now has been sort of raised for such a time as this, just like Queen Esther, to help save the Jewish people from the Iranian menace?" He responded: "As a Christian, I certainly believe that's possible." (See the Aljazeera article by Dabashi, "Is Trump a King Cyrus or a Queen Esther?")

¹³⁷ The concept of agency, control, and self-hood in regard to Jewish identity in the diaspora is discussed within Beal's, "Who Filled His Heart to Do This? Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther."

¹³⁸ Oren, "Esther – Jewish Queen of Persia," 160.

highest authority positions occupied by the men of the court.¹³⁹ This assumption has similarities to the concept of the “glass ceiling.” The term is a metaphor describing the “artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities,” in other words, an “invisible barrier based on attitudinal or organizational bias and discrimination” preventing women and minorities from rising up the ladder despite their qualifications.¹⁴⁰ However, much of the research on the glass ceiling revolves around the axis of gender whilst dismissing the effects of race, with studies describing the glass ceiling as a “phenomenon of gender stratification.”¹⁴¹ The term “bamboo ceiling” has emerged to describe the barriers faced by Asian Americans, where “despite increased visibility on college campuses and in elite professions, Asian Americans are rarely seen in high-ranking positions.”¹⁴² Li cites an example of data which found that in 2012, 20% of US law firm associates were minorities, yet minorities made up only 6% of partners. Additionally, “Asian Americans make up nearly half of all minority associates, yet have the ‘lowest conversion rate from associate to partner of any minority group.’ Asian Americans receive ‘the lowest return on education (i.e. worst salaries) of all ethnic groups.’”¹⁴³ Despite being regarded as the model minority, Asian Americans consistently struggle to break through the bamboo ceiling due to stereotypes of Asians lacking the necessary leadership and communication skills to reach the highest ranks. Returning to Chin’s metaphor, if Asians are viewed as robots, this means they are seen as the ideal labourer – but never the ideal leader. Ultimately, the perception of the Asian immigrant population places them perpetually in the middle-ground, where these attributes portray them as aspirational models of immigration whilst blocking them from breaking through the bamboo ceiling and attaining positions of leadership.

Esther possesses these attributes herself, with the potential to be read as a pawn obedient to the instructions of the different men under whose control she resides. Applying Chin’s metaphor further, if Asian women are viewed as “robot geishas,” this creates the perfect, functional, sexually appealing women who behave as programmed. In the same sense, Esther behaves as programmed by the men who control her, beginning with Mordecai, moving to Hegai and finally to King Ahasuerus. Fuchs argues both Esther and Ruth as biblical heroines are “flat, static and essentially functional; they move in a single direction (normally from the custody of one male to another).”¹⁴⁴ However, Esther uses these traits to win the king’s favour whilst exploiting her own sexualisation to her advantage – she recognises the only domain of power available to her and wields it as a tool to gain power. With an air of tact, she employs femininity and feigns submission in her appeal, marked by repetitive clauses of “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king” (7:3). The king falls easily to her charms, offering his golden sceptre:

As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and he held out to her the golden sceptre that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the sceptre. The king said to her, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom” (5:2–3).

Niditch describes how Esther’s cleverness “emerges in the way she employs womanly wiles to seduce Haman and Ahasuerus,” dressing for success by donning royal robes and speaking “in sweet words of flattery.”¹⁴⁵ This image is an “appealing portrait of women’s wisdom for the men of a ruling patriarchy, but hardly an image meaningful or consoling to modern women,” instead the interaction paints a portrait of a female literary archetype which is “not peculiar to Israelite imagery, nor to Near Eastern or biblical ‘wisdom’ traditions.”¹⁴⁶ A feminine, seductive woman using her charms to win over (and regarding Haman, to trick) powerful men is a familiar archetype, with stories of wise and cunning temptresses recurring throughout biblical narratives – comparisons can be drawn to characters such as Bathsheba or

¹³⁹ In “Esther and the Queen’s Throne,” Zefira examines the nature of Esther’s role within the Persian court and the tension between Esther’s perception as a fully fledged queen or one who only possesses a decorative title.

¹⁴⁰ Li, “Hitting the Ceiling,” 143.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 145–6.

¹⁴⁴ Fuchs, “Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative,” 159.

¹⁴⁵ Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” 39.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Delilah. However, Niditch recognises that although this image may not be consoling to modern women, gender is not the only factor to contemplate when examining Esther's actions: "I am inclined to believe that the work was written in diaspora, for a cultural group surrounded by overlords in an alien setting."¹⁴⁷ She views the text as a portrayal of how "one deals with life in exile as members of an insecure, sometimes persecuted minority by steering a course of survival somewhere between co-option and self-respect."¹⁴⁸ Despite her position within the court, Esther is still a member of the persecuted minority as Mordecai is quick to remind her. She must act within her means, steering a course of survival through beauty, sexuality, and submission in the form of hosting banquets to honour her two powerful male guests. Niditch makes connections between the role of the trickster in folktales to the wisdom heroine in this narrative, emphasising their shared status as underdogs experiencing marginality who weave between the loopholes of the structures of power to defy the establishment.¹⁴⁹ By framing Esther as an underdog tale, Niditch points to other relevant markers of these literary tropes, explaining how "underdog tales provide various models for dealing with authority: tricksterism, self-inclusion in the power-structure and/or collaboration."¹⁵⁰ This is at the crux of Esther's position as a postcolonial feminist icon, her underdog status of double colonisation requires work *within* the system and not explicitly against in order "to become an indispensable part of it. This model personified by Esther is strongly contrasted with that of Vashti. Direct resistance fails."¹⁵¹ Under systems of oppression, colonised subjects cannot afford direct resistance, let alone subjects who are double colonised. Oren illustrates Esther's inner turmoil:

Is she going to act as a Jew, or as a woman? Even though she holds the throne as Persian queen, she is the only representative of both discriminated-against classes in the whole book. Esther is, as Letty Cottin Pogrebin describes herself, 'twice over marginal;' and, as such, she is almost obliged to disobey somebody!¹⁵²

To further examine Esther's double identity, I draw attention to Oren's question: will Esther *act* as a Jew, or as a woman? Far from the vapid beauty queen she is at times perceived as, I argue that Esther is fully aware of the power that her sexuality and position as desired object grants her – therefore she *performs* her gender to maximum effect.¹⁵³ This reading is further illuminated by the theory of performative gender developed in the feminist works of Judith Butler. Thorough analysis of the intersections between race and gender within the text requires reflection on how we define gender roles. I argue that Esther's actions are methods of performing the femininity which is initially prescribed onto her through sexualisation, therefore inviting a deeper examination into what constitutes these gender roles and an exploration of the role of the body.

7 The body as a site of inscription

Gender performativity is one of the concepts explored in Butler's key work of feminist theory "Gender Trouble," in which Butler responds to a reading of Sartre "for whom all desire problematically presumed as heterosexual and masculine, was defined as *trouble*."¹⁵⁴ She emphasises that "for that masculine subject

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 42.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁵² Oren, "Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia," 125.

¹⁵³ In "Mirror, Mirror in the Text: Reflections on Reading and Rereading," Bach discusses aesthetic perceptions of Esther. During a workshop at a Jewish feminist conference on the book of Esther, participants described the character as "blond (unanimous)", "petite and doll-like", "tall, stately and elegant", "blue-eyed, green-eyed". In other words, Bach describes how Esther seemed to fit "the Personal Columns description of a perfect woman. In the looking glass of my workshop, Esther appeared as an American Dream."

¹⁵⁴ Butler, "Gender Trouble," 2540.

of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position.¹⁵⁵ Esther performs femininity, spelling out “trouble” for the men in power through unanticipated agency.¹⁵⁶ She begins by donning her robes, a manifestation of acknowledging her authority by literally wearing royalty, and enters into the king’s presence with full awareness that she is the object of desire. In this scene, Esther purposefully returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the king’s authority – a literal example of the scandal of sudden intrusion into male space that Butler describes.¹⁵⁷ Butler continues, “the radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other’ suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory.”¹⁵⁸ King Ahasuerus easily succumbs to Esther, repeatedly offering half his kingdom and extending his golden sceptre (an action rife with sexual euphemism). Coupled with his excessive reaction to Vashti’s defiance, this reveals a form of dependency on the female Other. Butler pushes this concept further, arguing that power seems to be more than an exchange between subject and Other, by asking: “What configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between ‘men’ and ‘women’ and the internal stability of those terms?”¹⁵⁹ Building on Butler’s deconstruction of this relationship, this reading requires a closer examination of the use of the body in relation to gender roles within the text.

In reference to Foucault’s essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Butler relays how the body is “figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription: ‘the body is the inscribed surface of events.’”¹⁶⁰ Within the book of Esther, the body plays an important role as a site onto which structures of power are inscribed. Oren describes how legislating the body is a dominant feature throughout the text, which “lends itself to a reading that emphasizes materiality, because it presents the world in the coded language of the body. The story is not only told; it is performed.”¹⁶¹ This is first introduced by the banquet motif which runs through the narrative, wherein feasting and drinking are processes through which the powerful convey their control. The opening scene descriptions (1:5–8) emphasise the king’s extravagance, a display in which the intoxicated body acts “as a metaphor for digesting and internalizing the ideology of the provider of the drink.”¹⁶² Oren points to the symbolic power of eating and drinking in other biblical narratives, such as evil entering from the boundaries of the body when drunk like water (Job 15:16; Prov. 4:17), thus revealing how the body becomes a surface onto which ideology can be inscribed. The hierarchy of power within the setting is demonstrated further through the king’s generosity with wine “as expressed in the Hebrew idiom *keyad hamelekh* (1:7), ‘as much as the hand of the king’ – that is, he pours freely.”¹⁶³ Oren compares usages of the word *yad* (“hand”) in the Hebrew bible, commonly representative of a higher power, as when God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt, whilst the exaggerated variety of drinking cups outlines the extent of the elite’s control by allowing all of the people of Susa to “feel important and included in the Persian political system.”¹⁶⁴ Through the imagery of the banquet motif, power dynamics are established from the very beginning of the text through King Ahasuerus’ elaborate displays of wealth; the security of his power over the empire is flaunted by the 180-day banquet clearly signifying that the king fears no threat if he

155 Ibid.

156 For further exploration of the gender dynamics within the text in relation to performativity and gender roles, see Adelman, “‘Passing Strange’ - Reading Transgender Across Rabbinic Midrash and Feminist Hermeneutics on Esther.” Adelman draws a comparison between Esther and Joseph as characters who rise to prominence within the palace in the Diaspora, suggesting a parallel between “the increasing autonomy of the characters in exile as they break gender boundaries”, and the “awakening of our feminist voices as interpreters.”

157 The role of the gaze as a form of opposition and political resistance is examined in bell hooks’ “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.”

158 Butler, “Gender Trouble,” 2540.

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid., 2543.

161 Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 140.

162 Ibid., 142.

163 Ibid., 143.

164 Ibid.

allows his kingdom to undertake such an extortionate level of intoxication. In other words, he is able to let his guard down and that of his subjects, as he maintains total and absolute control of the empire. Thus, the banquet motif presents bodies as sites of inscription through the imagery of ideological consumption.

The notion of bodies as receptors of inscribed power in light of Foucault's metaphor is most clearly evidenced in the beautification period which the girls must undergo before appearing before the king in his search for a new queen.¹⁶⁵ Oren outlines: "Close examination of the treatment of the female body in Esther reveals that its representation is not about women's cultural experience, or about cosmetology, but about men's institutions, representing the universal social body."¹⁶⁶ Of this scene, Ericka Dunbar argues that the text contains troubling silences that have been muted throughout the history of interpretation, pointing to collective trauma in the form of sexual trafficking framed as a beauty contest.¹⁶⁷ Dunbar points to the present parallels which can be gleaned from this interpretation, noting: "What stands out to me is that the girls in the narrative world are taken from provinces that are inhabited predominantly by brown and black minorities in our contemporary contexts."¹⁶⁸ Dunbar argues that although the scenario with the virgin girls is portrayed as harmless (perhaps even "fun" as it is labelled as a beauty contest) by investigating the four parties involved in transactions of sexual trafficking, the abuse becomes evident. These four parties are as follows:

The perpetrator, or the king, sexually exploits the victim(s). The vendor(s), or the king's servants, extend the services/bodies/capital that make sexual trafficking possible. The facilitator(s), that is, the officers in the provinces of the king expedites the victimization process, and the victim(s) are the object of sexual exploitation: namely, the virgin girls.¹⁶⁹

The girls are "confronted with displacement, subjection under imperial rule, and legalized gender oppression through the creation of hegemonic and sexist laws, exploitation, and rape."¹⁷⁰ These issues of collective trauma are unfortunately not unfamiliar to our contemporary context. Black and brown minorities have been confronted with displacement and subjection as well as legalised oppression in many examples throughout history. Asian women as a demographic have been subjected to sexualisation, exploitation, and harmful fetishisation which deploys the stereotype of submission with gross manipulation. Kwok points to how "many yellow women are reduced to sex machines in the sex industry, which turns Southeast Asia into 'the brothel of the world.'"¹⁷¹ The horrifying impact of sexual exploitation within the text of Esther bears unsettling similarities to the wide-scale exploitation of the "comfort women," which is "a translation of Japanese *ianfu*, a euphemism for 'prostitute.' The designation refers to the many thousands of women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army," most of whom came from territories occupied by Japan before and during World War II.¹⁷² The trauma experienced by the "comfort women" is a result of systematic sexual oppression enacted by the powerful elite. Imperial Japan sets up "stations" for their soldiers, as Joo describes:

Since men have sexual needs, some including the former mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, have argued that the government had the right and authority to force 2,00,000 women to "service" them, i.e. to violently terrorize and rape girls and women of all ages in Asia.¹⁷³

The scale of government violence against these women is not unlike the systematic trafficking of virgins across the empire by King Ahasuerus' subjects. They are reduced to the commodity of their bodies, as in the case of Vashti's deposal. Oren examines the year-long beautification period which the women were

165 See De Troyer, "An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2.8-18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint and the Second Greek Text" for more in-depth discussion on this scene.

166 Oren, "Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia," 145.

167 Dunbar, "For Such A Time As This? #UsToo: Sexual Trafficking, Silence, & Secrecy In The Book Of Esther."

168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 Ibid.

171 Kwok, "Mending of Creation: Women, Nature, and Hope," 224.

172 Joo, "Counter-Narratives: Rizpah and the 'Comfort Women' Statue."

173 Ibid.

subjected to: “The commodified ‘raw material’ is expected to further undergo a necessary refinement of oils and spices in order to befit the king’s sexual desire and thus function in the construction of the empire.”¹⁷⁴ The body is viewed not as belonging to an autonomous subject, but as a commodity to be exploited which must contain the natural components of youth, virginity, and beauty to serve the construction of the rejuvenated empire.¹⁷⁵ The beautification period reduces the individual woman to one piece of the king’s collective possessions, as her body becomes a vessel onto which is projected the idealised portrait of desire: “The cultural conditioning of the skin by saturation in oil is the symbolic language of constructing a new, holier Persian bride. Through the symbolic medium of bodily saturation in oils, the girls’ bodies come to represent the reconstructed royal body as is desired by the dominant male.”¹⁷⁶ It is important to consider the position of these women after their designated night with the king – they are no longer virgins and thus cannot re-enter society with the hopes of marriage, therefore they must join the king’s harem as concubines. They are, at once, rendered disposable. Drawing back to Dunbar’s analysis that the majority of these women would have been taken from provinces of Black and brown minorities, this reading reveals a disturbing similarity to the sexual exploitation of Asian women, “reduced to sex machines” as Kwok describes:

Multiply oppressed women have their history inscribed on their bodies, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes: “It is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South – the Two-Thirds World – that global capitalism writes its script.” Thus, Elsa Tamez has asserted, the woman’s body is a text to be read.¹⁷⁷

This statement recalls Foucault’s claim that the body is an inscribed surface of events. The body is a site onto which racial and gendered oppression is written; examples range from the collective trauma of the “comfort women” and other victims of sexual exploitation and violence, to the prominence of skin bleaching procedures and cosmetic surgeries with the intent of replicating Eurocentric features. Within the text, bodily inscriptions are represented in the oils used to saturate the women’s skin which embellish them as sexual commodities. However, Oren takes this inscription a step further by reading the (hybridised) identity markers on Esther’s own body.

Her body represents the paradox of the immersion in oils, perfumes and cosmetics. On the one hand, this process, which aims to alter and transform, steepens Esther’s body in Persian culture. On the other hand, the immersion does not seem to completely suffuse the chosen ideal Persian queen, who does not give up her Jewish identity (2:10); ironically, it enables her to exploit being the feminine divine for her own hidden agenda. Esther’s body turns out not to be the “raw material” it seems; it bears prior cultural text, making it the nexus where the Persian and Jewish cultures intersect, and where resistance or engagement with those systems begins.¹⁷⁸

This reading is reminiscent of the postcolonial concept of Bhabha’s “Third Space.” Bhabha defines the term as “a site of translation and negotiation [...] by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.”¹⁷⁹ Oren’s analysis reflects on Esther’s hybrid identity, as the text theorises Esther’s body as a Third Space encounter onto which Persian and Jewish cultures encounter one another, eluding polarity and instead becoming the space where resistance to those systems begins. Her strength lies in her liminality, able to cross back and forth over the border of identities demonstrated by her autonomous initiation of the “two intimate banquets (5:4–8; 7:1–9), two fasts (4:15–16), and, finally, the two Purim banquets (9:17–19).”¹⁸⁰ These acts also centre the body as a site of control, moving from one extreme to another of feasting and fasting, in which Esther is continuously in control and leading others in these actions. In this way, “the excluded and anointed female body that serves as spectacle and object of male control is able

¹⁷⁴ Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 147.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 149.

¹⁷⁷ Kwok, “Mending of Creation: Women, Nature, and Hope,” 225.

¹⁷⁸ Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 158–9.

¹⁷⁹ Bolatagici, “Claiming the (n)either/(n)or of ‘third space’,” 78.

¹⁸⁰ Oren, “Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia,” 158–9.

to assert power by using the established system of the banquets as a strategy for reversing political hierarchy,” with Oren claiming the obedient Esther becomes the *femme fatale*, luring men with wine to defeat the enemy.¹⁸¹

Esther therefore breaks free from the inscriptions intended for the female body as a commodity within the text. For the majority of the narrative, female characters are reduced to their bodies as objects of desire under the control of the male gaze: “the female body is marginalized and enclosed in a defined code of morality. A woman is assumed to be an obedient wife (1:20), a beautiful young virgin or a concubine.”¹⁸² These are the only three roles which the women can occupy, roles which Esther breaks free from to fulfil the status of Queen of Persia. It is notable, however, that Esther breaks free from these three definitive roles by working *within* them. On the surface, her actions appear to remain within the realms of an obedient wife who honours her husband through banquets, as well as her role as a beautiful, young, sexual possession of the king’s (at first a virgin, avoiding the role of concubine by “winning” the competition). She is fully aware of her position as the king’s sexual object, but capitalises on this to appeal to his desire in order to gain control. She has thus found a form of her own liberation, moving from the fear of not having been summoned by the king (reliant on his commands) to assert her position as queen, literally donning royalty and making a space for herself inside the court by demanding to be seen. The embracing of her sexuality and agency is the source of her power in this dynamic, which could in turn become a liberating stance as the sinful shame associated with women’s sexuality is subverted.

However, Esther’s position as a victim of sexual trafficking must not be swept aside by this interpretation. She can simultaneously be a victim of sexual exploitation and an autonomous character who chooses to wield her sexuality to gain power over the enemy – the two are not mutually exclusive positions. The relationship between women and their sexual agency within biblical narratives is fraught with tension which leads to a host of problems for contemporary feminist readers. Kwok raises an important point on Asian theology in particular:

Asian feminist theologians join other Third World theologians in the search for a form of spirituality that integrates body and soul, inner and outer worlds, and contemplation and social action. Specifically, they wish to reimagine and develop a spiritual practice that honors their embodied selves as women. All too often women’s sensuality and sexuality have been regarded as lustful, dangerous and sinful, both in the Christian and in the Asian traditions.¹⁸³

It is my belief that Esther’s story is a source of inspiration for such a redevelopment of spirituality which integrates these spheres of body and soul, inner and outer worlds, contemplation and social action. Esther moves from a decorated possession of the king’s to an active agent of liberation; she moves between her inner hidden world of her Jewish identity and the outer exposed world of Persian identity; lastly, she integrates her own contemplation over the consequences of her privileged position and the social action required to save her people. Her sensuality – often regarded as lustful, dangerous, and sinful as Kwok acknowledges – is instead more of a saving grace in this scenario. Not only does Esther take back authority of her sexuality, she utilises it to achieve her own ends in an act of resistance. Her body is reclaimed, and the dynamics of power are successfully subverted.

8 Conclusion

My reading of the book of Esther uses a postcolonial feminist hermeneutic that centres the experiences of the marginalised voices in question, in this case contemporary Asian women in diaspora, to allow for self-representation and self-liberation. The liminal position of Asian women in diaspora within a Western context introduces friction, as we move from one patriarchal system to another. The process of

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 114.

displacement is empowering as we leave the specific patriarchal oppressions of our “home” environments. This context typically enforces cultural expectations of domestic roles for women such as cooking, cleaning, expectations of marriage prioritised over the pursuit of careers – at this point I specifically refer to my knowledge of my own context as cultural values vary between communities and there is no singular, monolithic “Asian culture.” However, this displacement from a “home” environment is simultaneously disempowering as we enter into a “host” environment in which we experience patriarchal oppression of a different kind: by being fetishised, racialised, and Othered within Western societies. Patriarchy operates in different forms according to cultural contexts and thus displacement experienced by diaspora communities is a complex existence. It involves a state of “unbelonging” combined with the privileges of social mobility that are, presumably, granted by the “host” environments. My liminal position provides me with the agency to identify issues which might be overlooked by Western feminism. Yet, at the same time, I am limited by my ignorance of issues which would be clear to those in my home country. In the act of writing “in diaspora,” I recognise that my frame of reference will always be somewhat limited by the inherent friction of my position as an author based in a Western context. Instead, my reading aims to embrace this liminality and carve out a position rooted in the in-between. We can also find examples of where these identifiers directly intersect, by turning to contemporary Jewish Asian voices. Rabbi and Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdahl was the first Asian American to be ordained as a Rabbi as well as the first to be ordained as a cantor. In a 2014 interview with NPR, Buchdahl spoke about what this signifies for Jewish Asian communities:

I think many people think, wow, you represent the new face of Judaism in some way. And I would say, actually, if you look back across Jewish history, we’ve always been a diverse people. We’ve always been innovating and flexible, and that’s why we’ve survived and thrived through all the centuries [...] I can embody that vision in a way and lead such a prominent and influential community to really create different models for the larger – not just Jewish world – but for the larger movement for progressive religion and what that means in this world.¹⁸⁴

Her comments remind me once again of Lorde’s message: “Without community, there is no liberation, no future.”¹⁸⁵ We can create new models, envision new futures for what it means to be a progressive religious community, one which recognises the functions of our identities and how we reconstruct a decolonised world. This process begins with self-reflection. After all, from what we have learned of Esther as a diaspora story, this is not a new revelation. Rabbi Buchdahl comments on how people often think of Judaism as “a closed and rather tribal, insular people. And it’s not just who I am or how I look, but when I look back at Jewish history, I’m always amazed at the openness of our tradition and flexibility and innovation of our tradition.”¹⁸⁶ She recalls how she would lead services with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, resulting in the question that people living in diaspora will be all too familiar with:

Inevitably, after every service, someone would come up to him and say now Rabbi, Angela, now just tell me, where is she from? [...] And he always said, you know, I would always tell them she’s from Tacoma, Washington. And they’d say, well, that’s not exactly what we were asking. And he would laugh and say, and I knew that’s not what they were asking. But he wanted them to kind of dig a little deeper on what it means to be a Jew in the world.¹⁸⁷

I believe this response is key to developing and enriching our ideas of identity, and captures the reason why I began this research: how can we dig a little deeper, reflect a little more on what it means to be a Jew, Asian, immigrant, woman, or any other identifier? What does it mean to be who we are, in the positions we hold, and how can we use this to create positive changes in our communities?

The book of Esther has become a valuable source for my reflection on these questions. I developed my reading through an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on core concepts from postcolonial, feminist, and literary theory to illuminate understandings of Esther. This is first introduced by situating Esther within the

¹⁸⁴ Martin, “Asian-American Rabbi Changes The Face Of Judaism.”

¹⁸⁵ Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” 18.

¹⁸⁶ Martin, “Asian-American Rabbi Changes The Face Of Judaism.”

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

concepts of hybridity (her dual identity), mimicry (the suppression of her Jewish ethnicity), and the Third Space (her body as a site of encounter between inscribed identities). Secondly, the comparisons between Vashti and Esther invoked an examination of intersectional feminism, analysing the ways in which race interacts with gender to depart from an essentialist, Western feminist reading. The text is set in the Persian empire generally assumed to be written during the 4th century. Therefore, a modern, 21st century Western feminist lens cannot accurately reflect the core values displayed by the characters as it does not account for the colonial and patriarchal context. Instead, an intersectional feminist perspective considers the layers of marginality and conflicting levels of privilege at work within Esther's double colonisation. These layers open up an understanding of how we develop postcolonial identities, analysing the politicisation of racial categories, the strength found in marginalised solidarity, and the implications of racial stereotypes including submission, obedience, and the model minority. The connections between Esther's narrative and the contemporary issues experienced by Asian diasporic women in our hybridised identities evokes a sense of both validation and liberation. Our stories, across borders of the literary realm and lived experience, Jewish and Asian, are reflected as mirrored struggles.¹⁸⁸ In the same vein, Esther's victories – her newfound autonomy, agency, and power – also become reflections of our own potential for liberation. Lastly, the racial and gendered issues approached throughout the text are represented through a site of inscription: the body. Throughout the narrative, bodies are the locations onto which ideologies of power, control, and oppression are inscribed, through excessive hedonism, feasting, and intoxication which forces the subject to swallow the ideology of the hand which feeds them. The powerful elite exert control over the female body as a collective, through laws that silence them, and immersion in oils and perfumes to prepare them for sexual exploitation. Bodily adornments become central motifs for the exchange of power, such as the king's signet ring passing from Haman to Mordecai, or King Ahasuerus' command for Vashti to display herself with the royal diadem. There is a sinister undertone in this imagery, commanding a woman to wear a sign of total power within a male space, where it is clear she has none under the control of the male gaze. The virgins within the king's "beauty contest" are the most evident example of bodies as a site of control – allusions to sex trafficking and the consequent dismissal of collective trauma within receptions of the text is a disturbing revelation. This emphasises the importance of a hermeneutics of trauma, as Dunbar suggests, to appropriately consider the gender violence of biblical narratives.¹⁸⁹

Ultimately, Esther acknowledges these forms of racial and gendered oppression inscribed onto her and gains power over the king. Oren provides a powerful summary of how Esther embodies the challenge of liminal identity:

Esther's body is the agent around which conflicting representations meet and clash. Within the limits assigned to her by patriarchy, Esther proves that her position at the intersection of worlds can become a source of power, leading to the overturning of an unjust social order.' By transgressing accepted boundaries, she demands a redistribution of power and culture, revealing social borders as fictions of the people who hold privileged positions of power.¹⁹⁰

It is through her position of liminality, able to cross borders between worlds, that Esther can achieve her victory. As Asian women in diaspora, we experience a persistent sense of "unbelonging," never fully able to embrace either side of our hybrid identities. Kwok describes this as a shared experience of colonised individuals: "One of the traumatic characteristics of the 'colonial experience' is that one does not feel at home even in one's own homeland. Often one experiences feelings of displacement and fragmentation, along with a deep sense of alienation."¹⁹¹ In this alienation, Esther shares our suffering. Hiddenness is an underlying theme of her narrative, and hiddenness translates to silence, enforced through colonial and patriarchal oppression. In today's context, silence is also enforced through androcentric interpretations,

¹⁸⁸ I use the term "mirrored struggles" here to reflect solidarity between Jewish and Asian communities, and by no means do I intend to dismiss or appropriate the struggles that the Jewish community has faced through this interpretation of a Jewish text.

¹⁸⁹ Dunbar, "For Such A Time As This? #UsToo: Sexual Trafficking, Silence, & Secrecy In The Book Of Esther."

¹⁹⁰ Oren, "Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia," 160–1.

¹⁹¹ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 18.

and colonial and patriarchal ideologies which permeate both our hermeneutics in discourse and our lived experiences. Kwok proposes an alternative: “Today we must claim back the power to look at the Bible with our own eyes and to stress that divine immanence is within us, not in something sealed off and handed down from almost two thousand years ago.”¹⁹² To achieve this, Kwok insists that we must distinguish between a Western habit of essentialising and homogenising human experience, and “the womanist and Asian cultural constructs of the self, which are rooted in and understood through the communal experience.”¹⁹³ She provides the example of Dolores Williams’ interpretation of Hagar – rather than attempting to essentialise Hagar as a voice for all Black women’s experiences, she is presented as lifting up salient aspects of Black women’s collective experience. Likewise, my framing of Esther is not intended to homogenise Asian women’s experiences but rather, to form a prism through which our collective stories can be brought to light through historical imagination which “aims not only to reconstitute the past, but also to release the past so that the present is liveable.”¹⁹⁴ In this way, the story of Esther, who rose from Jewish orphan in diaspora to the Queen of Persia, is an empowering tale for postcolonial feminist readers. The book of Esther reminds us of the power that lies in taking control of our agency, recognising the potential of our positions, and embracing our identities to empower not just ourselves but also our communities. Through displays of individual and collective resistance against oppression, Esther becomes an icon for Asian diasporic women in the journey to liberation.

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